A place you can never go

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A place you can never go

by det395

Summary

When things don’t go according to plan, Hannibal makes a wish. He finds himself a year-and-a-half in the past and seemingly given another chance with Will.

His feelings about the situation only get more complicated when he realizes he may not have completely lost access to his old timeline after all.

A Digestivo canon divergence.

Notes

I have decided not to use Archive Warnings because, as you can probably imagine, major character death is made quite complicated with time travel/alternate universe stuff! So I guess this is your warning that there is death, loss, and grief in this story with questionable permanence.

PS: my fic *It's torn where there's beauty, it's torn where there's death* was originally part of this story before I realized the prologue was just unnecessarily long. It’s totally optional, but I thought I’d mention it if anyone wanted to read my angsty interpretation of Digestivo immediately before these events. The prologue’s prologue, if you will.

I hope you all enjoy :') ❤️

See the end of the work for more notes

Prologue: Restructuring

The morning light came without breakthrough.

The equation was still unfinished and dangerously close to a standstill. He needed to backtrack. He was running out of time.

Hannibal stood up from his spot near Will's bed instead of admitting its futility.

He drank his coffee on the front porch out of an old mug that said *I'd rather be fishing* that Hannibal couldn't imagine Will bought for himself. The price tag was only partially scratched off the bottom and wrinkled with water damage, surely a staple of some mandatory office Secret Santa for which Will was only really known by his few safe hobbies. But yes, he would rather be fishing, wouldn't he?

Hannibal stood up straight when he noticed the dark figure guarding the house. Chiyoh walked cautiously toward him, eyes skirting back to the road. This property was far more open than the Lecter estate. Less places to hide from the road and more people willing to enter its borders. It was only a matter of time, and she knew it too.

Chiyoh met him on the porch, hesitant but kind-eyed. They rarely found a need for words between them, having developed an understanding of each other at a young age almost entirely without them. Now Chiyoh might slip away and go somewhere Hannibal would never find.

"Will you go home?" he asked, and then paused, considering what he really wanted to know. "Can you go home?"

"No more than you can," she said with a knowing gaze.

He glanced down toward the rifle she held like it was another part of her body. She had always been loyal.

"Would you watch over me?"

"I will." She looked toward her feet. "Not in a cage. Some beasts shouldn't be caged."

He imagined himself caught in the darkness of that place they could never return to, in place of the man she had imprisoned for most of her life. Would Chiyoh truly be caught in such limbo if it was him in chains instead?

"Your obsessive and successful hunt, whose plight was it driven by? Mine? Yours?" he asked, and then saw it in her eyes.

"Mischa's," she said.

She observed him for a moment and then asked something that he'd been expecting.

“Did you eat her?”

He bowed his head slightly in admission.

“Yes. But I did not kill her.”

Chiyoh seemed relieved by his honesty. It was worth more than she knew. The words escaped his mouth with the impersonal distance of a copied language he didn’t know, and that was difficult enough. The real truth of the matter existed somewhere unreachable. For her unfailing loyalty, she deserved at least an answer to her question.

Chiyoh had always offered a comforting security, one that Hannibal removed himself from. Placidity was a shame, but with age and experience, Hannibal could understand the appeal with less judgment.

“The most stable elements, Chiyoh, appear in the middle of the periodic table, roughly between iron and silver. Between iron and silver….” He felt it out in his mouth. “I think that's appropriate for you.”

He did not fault her for turning to leave without replying. It was more words than they usually exchanged. She left to linger just out of eyesight.

It was nice to know some things never changed.

Hannibal drank the last drudges of his coffee, cringing at the bitter grounds that hadn’t been filtered out by Will’s old machine.

He held the mug in front of his chest, took in a deep breath, and then let it fall from his grip.

Evidently, even the oldest and cheapest of mugs imprinted with silly slogans were more sturdy than the average tea cup. He picked up the cup and dropped it again, and then again until it cracked in half and one piece rolled off the porch.

He could drop half of Will’s mismatched mug cupboard at his feet and still nothing would be twitching together, but he considered trying just to see.

He was sure the noise woke Will so he returned inside, the door creaking as he re-entered. Will was already sitting up and shifting his stiff body. His notebook of equations for turning back time was left open on the foot of his bed. Hannibal had wanted it to be seen, for Will to understand the extent of his regret for what he suspected was to come. He retrieved his notebook as he sat near the foot of Will's bed.

He felt uncharacteristically unprepared. They’d had many goodbyes in the past and he couldn’t shake the feeling that this one would be more sustaining.

“Do we talk about teacups and time and the rules of disorder?” Hannibal asked, holding his notebook in his lap. Will had a mythical way about him, preternatural in that strange things tended to come about him, as if he was a prince in a fairytale rather than a wayward stand-in agent of the law. Perhaps he would know the missing variable in Hannibal’s equation.

“The teacup's broken. It's never going to gather itself back together again,” Will rasped.

His hair fell messily over the soiled bandage on his forehead. He was certain Will wouldn’t allow him the care of changing it this time.

“Not even in your mind?” Hannibal asked, because surely that was where salvation sat, with all the other treasures just out of Hannibal’s reach.

Hannibal had never wanted someone more.

“Your memory palace is building,” Hannibal continued, considering the undeniable presence that followed him to his furthest hiding places. It was jarring that someone could encroach on his most sacred of places, but if anyone could sidestep what was natural and expected, it was the man before him. Hannibal had long since stopped being able to control Will’s influence on him.

“It's full of new things. It shares some rooms with my own. I've discovered you there, victorious,” he continued, hopeful.

“When it comes to you and me, there can be no decisive victory,” Will replied.

“We are a zero-sum game?” Hannibal asked. If that was true then it hardly mattered how far back he searched for Will. They would never meet in the ideal he once dreamed.

Will looked past his shoulder, running his eyes over the emptiness of his home. His voice was gentle. It might have felt better if his rage was still recognizable.

“I miss my dogs,” he said. “I'm not going to miss you.”

In such simple words outlining exactly what made this place a home, and Hannibal had long lost that privilege. Will continued on, choosing his words carefully in what Hannibal knew was a rush to say goodbye.

“I'm not going to find you,” he said. “I’m not going to look for you. I don't want to know where you are, or what you do. I don't want to think about you anymore.”

Frustrated at his intransigence, Hannibal resisted it being such a simple ending. There was more to them than that, if only Will could accept it.

“You delight in wickedness and then berate yourself for the delight.”

He had delighted in that wickedness toward Hannibal before. He’d prefer that to being turned away, and perhaps Will knew it.

Will spoke clearly. “You delight. I tolerate. I don't have your appetite.”

Hannibal did not feel delight, nor did he have any appetite. Only a burning between his shoulder blades that rivalled the one in his chest.

“Goodbye, Hannibal,” Will said in finality, as if it wasn’t obvious enough.

Hannibal was not one to overstay his welcome, but if there was a way to escape this conclusion, he would have. He was at a loss and Will's eyes were more damning than anyone's had any right to be.

So he stood, tucking his notebook into his coat pocket, and took the last of his dignity with him.

He found shelter from the wind in Will's garage at the end of the drive amidst rusted tools and a respectable deep freeze. Inexplicably, it was still on. It seemed that Will decided to continue to pay the electricity bill rather than get rid of the few stores of meat inside. It offered Hannibal some relief to lay with the fresh burn on his back against the cool surface.

He pulled out his notebook and propped it up on his stomach. Was his regret truly so strong that he couldn't think of a way forward without erasing what he'd done?

It felt dishonest to say he would change what he'd already done. He couldn't imagine getting to this place having not learned the sorrows of companionship and heartbreak. He'd rather enjoyed himself at times.

It felt more truthful to say he was merely greedy for more. Will made him feel a little selfish, and he wanted to covet every bit of him. It would not have been so hard to kill Will two nights ago. It would not have been so difficult to be gentler with Will those months ago. There was appeal in all of the different potentials and it was a shame he only had one.

Perhaps that was love. It was not the absence of hurt or the necessity of platitudes, just the restructuring of one's life around another person, entirely against one's will. He'd found himself longing for Will before he even knew him, as if he could go many years back and spend a bit more time with him.

The restructuring of a life was akin to a sacrifice of old values, and that may be his answer to placing Will more securely in his life in the future, even if it did in fact render him to being a bird in a cage.

Hannibal would not let Will forget him.

At night, he saw the police lights through the shed door.

He strode toward the vehicle, squinting at the headlights. A man—the unmistakeable and powerful figure of Jack Crawford—stepped before the vehicle so he was silhouetted by the flashing lights.

“He’s gone, Jack,” he heard Will say. Hannibal could imagine the scowl on Jack’s face as he knocked his cane against the ground in frustration. Hannibal quickened his pace.

“Jack,” Hannibal called from the darkness, finally stepping into the light. “I’m here.”

He stepped forward with his palms in the air until he could see Jack’s face. Strangely, there were no other officers, but perhaps the FBI had lost too much faith in Jack to give him that kind of control. They still would not turn away the Chesapeake Ripper if Jack delivered him on a platter, so he settled down onto his knees in the snow, trying not to favour his bad leg too much.

Jack smiled in satisfaction. That expression grew darker each time Hannibal saw him, the man changing in ways that Jack probably didn’t even realize.

“You finally caught the Chesapeake Ripper, Jack,” Hannibal said.

Curiously, Jack only stared down at him.

“Why’d you come alone, Jack?” Will demanded. Hannibal turned to look at him, standing there with his downtrodden expression and messy hair as if he’d never left his bed.

Hannibal caught his mistake as he noticed Will’s perceptive gaze on Jack. Perhaps he should have been more careful stepping into his own destruction.

“Why’d you come alone?” Will repeated. He stepped closer to the edge of his porch.

He lost the track and was spinning wildly off of it. It was time to fight, of course. Life was precious—*his* life was precious. His injured leg locked up as he tried to stand.

“I don’t think I want to catch you. I think I should have done this a long time ago,” Jack said. Hannibal looked back to see his hand deep in his pocket.

“Jack, hey,” Will said, and Hannibal could hear the sound of his feet rushing down the porch steps. In his distraction, Hannibal missed the source of the clicking noise.

A number of shots rang, from five feet in front of him to the tops of the trees, and for a moment he hoped he could have trust in his watcher, but his head was peculiarly hot and his knee hit the cold ground again.

“*No, don’t!”*

His body fell immobile just moments before his world turned as dark as the dreary sky above, and the last thing he thought was to wish for just one more chance. One more chance with the enraged, spiteful, screaming man bending down over his dying body.

Déjà vu

Hannibal's ponderings about the afterlife were creative rather than pragmatic. The eternal rest of heaven or the hellish lake of fire and brimstone in Christianity. The grey and misty land of Hades where the lord of the dead ruled, or the Olympic pantheon on Mount Olympus. From the sunny pleasures of the *Elysium* to the dark pits of *Tartarus*, the Buddhist's depiction of rebirth in the endless *saṃsāra* to the Shinto's world of darkness *Yomi,* and the reincarnation of Hindus. The followers of Zoroastrianism must cross the Chinvat Bridge to heaven which became as narrow as a sharp razor for sinners. The Aztecs had their paradise for the honourable sacrifices, the beautiful *Tlalocan* for the most violent of deaths, and the harsh land of *Mictlan* for the mundanely passed. And, of course, Hannibal could not disregard his favourite interpretation from the prose he so adored of Dante's nine concentric circles of torment.

The metaphorical and symbolic value of such depictions were pleasing enough for Hannibal to collect the different interpretations he could get his hands on, but never once did he question his lifestyle with worry of where he would end up. Some of his braver cuts of meat told him he was going to hell and he told them he would indeed like to visit one day.

Practically, he enjoyed the mystery of the unknowable and comforted himself with the fact that there was always another journey to come that he could not prepare for. He'd never felt like his consciousness was weak enough to simply fade out like the synapses in the brain at the time of death, but he would accept an eternal rest as well, whatever God intended.

Hannibal slowly became aware that he was conscious and awake but he did not open his eyes. There was much to catalog, and whether he had survived the last events that he remembered or had gone on to the indescribably *after* of life, he'd like to step in level-headed.

He was met with the dominant scent of his wild-collected imported Kopi luwak coffee beans, an undeniable staple of his Chandler Square house. How curious. If there was some kind of heaven, it wouldn't be his Chandler Square house and it wouldn't be granted to a man like him, but neither was this place where he had supped with Will many times any kind of hell.

There was a cold floor beneath his feet and he was generally drowsy. There was a startling lack of injury plaguing his body, or so it felt, and he knew how to recognize the numbing of any pain medication.

And then the doorbell rang.

He opened his eyes to his kitchen. Early morning light shone through the window and his Royal Belgian Balancing Siphon coffee maker was gently whirring.

It seemed there was no more time to assess his surroundings as whoever rang the doorbell had opened the door and was walking closer. Hannibal should have gotten in the habit of locking his door. Except, he wasn't really here, was he?

Will turned the corner and Hannibal straightened up.

“Will,” he said in surprise. He’d seen this Will before—this cascade of messy bangs and sunken eyes and old ill-fitting jacket. As exact as if this were a dream or a memory.

Will slowed his steps as he approached the kitchen and smiled shyly as he furrowed his eyebrows.

“Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten that I called and were just up enjoying the morning.”

Distantly, Hannibal remembered. A call that woke Hannibal from his slumber at 5:24 am. It was only after presuming Hannibal’s help that Will remembered his social cues and apologized for calling at such an ungodly hour.

“I’m sure this is the last time you want a call from me, but….” The breathy sounds of Will forcing out what he never wanted to admit to anyone. *“It was sleepwalking, last night. It seems I took a stroll of the neighbourhood instead of resting. Typical, right?”*

Hannibal shook his head and blinked at the counter. “Although I may be, is it safe to assume you are not sleepwalking now?”

The words escaped his lips with the unsettling déjà vu of re-acting a tired piece of theatre.

Déjà vu, an anomaly of memory that in its pathological form was often associated with temporal lobe epilepsy or neurological illness, but of which two-thirds of healthy individuals reported experiencing. A phenomenon for which there were few scientific explanations and enough mystery for paranormal conspiracy to propagate.

Right on cue, Will said, “I’m sorry it’s so early.”

Hannibal stared blankly at Will. This was decidedly not an anomaly of Hannibal’s perfect memory.

A dream, perhaps without the usual cues of subconsciousness if Hannibal was in a coma. A coma, by medical definition, was the cessation of mental activity during which there was no evidence of the electrical pulses of brain functions or the typical sleep-wakefulness cycle that would lend itself to dreams, but certain anecdotes had suggested otherwise and Hannibal was nothing if not open-minded.

Will fidgeted and furrowed his eyebrows, growing increasingly uncomfortable under Hannibal’s silent gaze.

This and all of the sensory details surrounding Hannibal felt startlingly real. It couldn’t be…

And yet, for all of his commitment to the rules of disorder in the physical world, he had never been able to disregard the possibility of turning back time, just as he could never shake the appeal of God above.

“I apologize. I may be feeling a little under the weather myself.” He grabbed their mugs to fill. The effects of caffeine on his body would be another indication of whether he was truly

awake.

“I am extra sorry then. You should be resting.”

The words Hannibal had used so long ago were on the tip of his tongue and perhaps it was better to use them than sabotage what very well could be his new reality. Any change in behaviour could have a catastrophic effect, if this reality really was to be believed. The flap of a butterfly's wing and the next church may collapse.

“Never apologize for coming to me. Office hours are for patients. My kitchen is always open for friends.”

He paused, looking for distraction from the strangeness of repeating his script. He prided himself on choosing his words carefully and avoiding the repetition of phrases when there was always the opportunity to bring something new into the world. Words were too fluid and they should be treated with care.

But had these words not existed yet in this world?

He busied his hands. “It’s nothing coffee won’t help,” he added.

Now he had to consider his next words, and fast. He recalled his original motivations to make Will question his own sanity and to alienate him from Jack Crawford. At this point, he hadn’t even known Will’s diagnosis and he wouldn’t be showing many symptoms yet, but he knew to guide him away from that direction nonetheless. His self-preservation was of the utmost importance.

Will took the glass mug that Hannibal passed to him and sipped at his coffee with a wary look over the rim.

However, if Hannibal was to have a second chance, he would not waste it by repeating the same past over again. He was, of course, an avid fan of church collapses and his social life had never been any more or less vulnerable than the limestone and glass of cathedrals.

He pretended to think. Will had come here for one thing and wouldn’t appreciate Hannibal entirely ignoring the subject of his burning brain, as much as his encephalitis was tired old news for Hannibal, and a memory that was a little painful in hindsight.

“Any more hallucinations?” Hannibal asked.

Will’s attention shot to Hannibal. Hannibal had forgotten this side of him—wide and vulnerable blue eyes so open to letting Hannibal care for him, so desperate when considering Hannibal the only person that even would.

“Yes, actually,” Will said.

He had left that out before, perhaps out of shame.

“Of what nature?”

“Of… 300-pound woodland creatures. That kind of nature.”

“I see.” How curious.

“Sleepwalking and hallucinations, what does that mean?”

“Any number of things, mental or physical,” Hannibal said.

This Will was still undoubtedly a threat to him. Keeping him debilitated by his illness and confused by his own mind was a safeguard to discovering Hannibal’s identity too soon.

Hannibal felt suddenly overcome by an unbearable wash of tiredness. Just as tired as Will had looked in his bed in the morning—the last morning that he could remember in this out-of-order timeline. This change of pace had disoriented him and he needed to think.

“Could it be a seizure?” Will asked, stepping closer and seeking Hannibal’s wavering gaze.

“Doubtful. Will you allow me some time to consult with my colleagues? This may be something out of my purview and I don’t wish to jump to any conclusions too prematurely. But Will, trust me when I say you will be just fine.”

Will couldn’t quite hide the disappointment and doubt in his smile. Fortunately, he seemed to understand Hannibal’s dismissal as the subtle goodbye that it was. He drained the last of his coffee like it was a tumbler of whiskey.

“Thank you for the coffee. That was needed. I should see what awaits me for the day.”

He set his glass on the counter and tapped next to it twice, a strange fidget to acknowledge Hannibal’s help, for all of the lack of it in their brief meeting.

“I hope you feel better,” Will said as if he wasn’t the one with a flame igniting in his brain.

“Goodbye, Will,” he said, and tried not to wish that Will would forgo Hannibal’s social cues and stay a bit longer.

When he heard the click of the front door, Hannibal felt his absence even stronger. His Baltimore kitchen felt strange and empty in that there was no grief outlining its corners yet. If all of this world followed the memorable script that Will had tried to maintain today, then Abigail would be alive and Hannibal’s life would still be meticulously protected.

Except for Hannibal. He felt the phantom injuries lining his body and the grief filling his lungs. He had been shaped and moulded and yet was thrown back into the greatest regression he could imagine. What was there to do from this point on?

He was out of his depths.

He found his cell phone on the counter and checked the time. It was indeed September 22nd, *2013*. He did the math quickly in his head, coming up to 403 days earlier than it last was.

He yanked up the sleeves of his robe and scanned his wrists. There was not even the faintest hint of scarring. His body corroborated the old date, and he was more apt to trust this than his electronics.

He turned toward his fridge. Seeing as there was no clear door waiting for him to exit this familiar pocket in time, he might as well take care of himself. If anything was going to clear his mind, it was cooking.

He took a quick inventory of his ingredients and set out on his plan of a hearty American breakfast, seeing as he hadn't been able to appreciate returning to this country he never thought he'd see again.

He worked quickly, sizzling sausages, cracking open two eggs with each hand, and then stirring chopped green onion, pepper, and herbs into his fried potato. He set the table for himself and poured a fresh cup of coffee.

It did him good to fill his stomach, settling back into his old routine quickly, if a bit uneasily.

Could he really have been granted something he only slightly hesitated to call a miracle? How many people truly received a second chance at life?

He'd been preparing himself to surrender the sun and go to prison for as long as Will left him there. It felt like a gift to somehow be back here, dream or not. He would take it as a gift, or it would mean nothing at all.

No longer did he need to chain himself to wait for Will. He could simply sit with him and enjoy one of their conversations, or better yet, a meal and some wine followed by their looser tongues. It was such simple delights for having had such complicated tastes his whole life, but he already accepted that love was a restructuring of his life, and that had never felt truer than now after God took him back to this first morning that Will really started to come to him and depend on him.

It wasn't all he wanted to do though. He wanted to stoke that fire he felt with all of his new knowledge. He wanted to quicken their journey to meeting in honesty. He would fill Will's life with Hannibal's influence and the blood that rained around them.

He had no intention of letting tired old history repeat.

Hannibal worried that if he stopped for even a moment, he would succumb to the vertigo of this new, strange world. Every sensory detail felt too stark to be a dream, but he questioned the vividness of his mind.

Perhaps cutting through flesh and being reminded of the constancy of life and death was just what he needed, but it was hard to grapple with the fact that those natural laws apparently did

not apply to him. He'd never questioned his mortality; his superiority was hand-crafted and built. He was called a devil in the tabloids, yet no supernatural entities had offered him a deal. Above all, he was a realist who played with the natural disorder of the world, not needing the magic of fairytales or the fantasy of science fiction to find heart-fluttering beauty in the world.

There was beauty to find and then there was beauty to make with his own hands. Despite his disorientation, he was inspired like he hadn't been in months.

To do what he wanted to do and do it well, he needed to remember. It wasn't only Will's mind palace that had been expanding rapidly in recent times. Hannibal's had undergone its greatest reconstruction since its conception with a place for all of Will's conversations.

He hesitated. Not the Will of this world. He remembered *his* Will who shared each and every memory with him. The sickly Will he had spoken to this morning was steps behind, untransformed, and had no influence on Hannibal. Like a puppet recreation with a pull-string to harp preordained thoughts and ideas, stuck far behind what Hannibal knew was possible.

There was a discordance he had never been able to get past with his extensive studying about turning back time. Without full control over travel, there was no way to tell if he was in the same world months in the past and rewriting his own future, or if this was a parallel universe. Was this Will a stranger, and did he leave his own Will behind to live his life as alone as he was before meeting Hannibal?

The thought sent a rush of melancholy so strong through him that he immediately packed his things up to leave for his office.

Will had entered the halls of his mind and made a home there. Hannibal had seen him, spoke to him, in the only other experience he'd ever had that made him question the natural laws of the universe. He was never sure if it was his own idealism that brought Will into his mind so intimately, but his presence felt as real as it ever had. And then Will had shown up in the Uffizi Gallery and proven the impossible true with his forever-knowing eyes.

Hannibal lingered around the entrance to his memory palace as he drove. If he entered those halls now, would it be echoing with his absence?

He did not try, and instead prepared for his therapy sessions. He read his notes and couldn't garner much energy for his past patients that entered through the door, even those he'd once enjoyed. Franklyn Froideveaux leaned so close to Hannibal that he thought he might slip right off the chair and kneel in front of him like a dog. Certain patients noticed his impatience. Some fought for his attention while others sunk back into insecure silence, but he couldn't find it in himself to care.

Now that the thought had come, he couldn't shake the great sense of loss. Will's goodbye was more permanent than he could have known. He lost the man he loved and was given a regressed replacement like some kind of cosmic joke.

However, it had always been Will's mind that he wanted, not a series of events that even he admitted had gone out of control, with grievances that could never be forgiven. That potential

would be within Will in any world, and there was so much that Hannibal could still glean.

It was hard to completely forgo the grief that he felt, and he was wary when he stepped into his memory palace.

He shut his mind to those halls and rooms that he did not wish to see empty. This was something he had ample practice with when his palace was fraught with the monsters in its depths. It seemed that most of his mind was becoming unreachable with sorrows.

But there were things he needed to remember.

He went further back to conversations had in this very office until he could recall what case Will had brought him.

“Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” Hannibal had quoted when Will told him about their Angel Maker. Will nodded like it was gospel, because it was the truth of the killer he felt.

Hannibal knew where Elliot Buddish would kill next too, and that was where he would interfere first.

First, he apologetically postponed his next therapy appointment with Will, citing his feeling under the weather. As much as he wanted to see him, it would be easier to speak to him after Hannibal had successfully changed this world. It would unsettle him less to not have to hear Will parroting the ideas that Hannibal had already heard before.

He took care of his other engagements as well. He used his feigned sickness to postpone dinner with Jack, therapy with Bedelia, and a visit with Abigail. He had much to think about in regards to all three of them, and none of them were his priority right now. The rest of the plans he found in his itinerary were easily cancelled with sold concert tickets and regretful emails.

Next, he planned his recipe. Something new was in order. He experimented with some special cuts of meats from his preferred butcher in Baltimore and added it to his records.

His own butchers he planned in his head. He would leave no evidence to speak of, even in this second-chance world that made him question how careful he really needed to be. If he found himself reset rather than gone as a result of his death, what was stopping him from creating true chaos? Only the uncertainty made him pause, but he could not deny that his curiosity was pressing.

There was still that tiny voice in his head questioning his reality. It felt not unlike he was chasing the climax of a dream before waking. If he was stuck in a dream, then he was somewhere vulnerable and unaware.

He felt uncharacteristically confused. Holding onto stability for dear life.

When the night came, he met the Angel Maker, whom he’d only ever seen in photos before, and *he* seemed real enough. The Angel Maker told Hannibal that he was a blazing glory of

fire from head to toe and squinted at the light so hard that tears streamed down his face.

It was different to see The Angel Maker in person. He had heard at length about the strangely coincidental choice of his victims and wondered now if there really was more than what met the eye. Who was there to say that Hannibal had not woken up in a new world in which angels walked among man to force repentance through flesh and blood?

He cut the skin off the man's back with ease as Elliot Buddish stayed miraculously still through the pain, trembling but sated even as Hannibal emasculated him.

There was a practice in Norse mythology of questionable historical accuracy in which the Vikings would sever one's ribs from their spinal column and pull their lungs through the back in a manner that still allowed the person to breathe. The lungs would resemble angel wings and rise and fall with life. He knew well enough from his training in medicine that lungs could not function outside the body without the adequate pressure of their cavity and supporting muscles, but he wondered if The Angel Maker couldn't overcome the laws of nature in this too.

Hannibal cracked and removed his ribs, leaving small pieces still attached to the spine. He drew back the lungs carefully. They quivered under his hands for a few moments longer in a makeshift spread of wings still bursting with life before The Angel Maker died at last. He heard choir music soar from behind his eyes.

Hannibal sawed and nailed the bones back together so they stretched out from his body and then draped the strips of lung and skin over them in wings that would forever be spread wide. In the light, the bones would be seen through the skin as if they were appendages grown straight from his spine.

He recited in his mind: *Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!"* Yes, that was rather fitting after all.

Hannibal used a pulley system to raise the Angel Maker turned Angel high in the sky of the alleyway. Hannibal stepped back to admire. It was a kind of translation from the Angel's vision to his. With love, he silently thanked him for the privilege.

Soon Will would look upon his creation. Would he be able to draw out Hannibal's inspiration garnered from another world?

Would he feel the love that Hannibal held onto? Would he recall the love he held for Hannibal throughout all their pain and betrayals, that Hannibal was almost certain was there somewhere?

Would he understand, and see Hannibal for who he was, even across the uncrossable span of such divinity that was this miracle?

Omniscience

Arguably, Hannibal had skirted the edge of omniscience before. It made him feel closer to God.

It amused him greatly to keep his cards carefully hidden in his coat pocket while he influenced the lives around him to the best of his ability.

Now he knew everything from election results to upcoming publications and their successes. He knew the local cultural events that would be announced and the affairs of his colleagues. He knew that over 5000 people would die in a typhoon in the city of Tacloban in the Philippines on November 10th and that Nelson Mandela would succumb to his chronic lung infection the next month. Next year, the Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 would mysteriously disappear and Ebola would strike West Africa.

Had he been given some foresight, Hannibal could have become famous in betting circles or taken up a hobby of reading fortunes.

Knowing and being responsible for the details of a crime Will was bringing to him was an old and timeless amusement in the game of omniscience and one that was a breath of fresh air to re-experience.

Will sat across from him in his office, tapping his foot on the ground.

“The case is, for all intents and purposes, solved,” Hannibal commented. As expected, Will quickly identified Elliot Buddish as the original Angel Maker and the new tableau to be the work of someone else—who he perceptively identified as the Copycat Killer. Hannibal had to say he was impressed, the jump to the Minnesota Shrike’s copycat was one he was holding out on.

“It’s too simple,” Will said. “It might be enough for Jack, but it’s not enough for me. What is it between these two killers that attracts the Copycat?”

He wore beige khakis and a deep green, lint-specked plaid shirt, a fashion relic of his time before the hospital. It was difficult to discern whether his tastes had changed when his mind did or if it was an attempt to appeal to Hannibal’s aesthetic sensibilities. Will was undoubtedly sensitive to the tastes around him, but Hannibal could admit to a certain degree of gullibility when it came to Will. He had looked so decadent when dressed well.

“You are so certain it is the same copycat?”

“The elevation, the dramatization, the mockery, the surgical skill… you know, this killer cut bloody ruffles into the wings like it had feathers. Not to mention the ribs as reinforcements. The Angel Maker was practical and rushed, the Copycat makes his version to be *art.*”

“You are a link between these two killers,” Hannibal said.

“Yeah, me and a dozen other actual agents,” Will said, but turned away. It felt right to him, Hannibal suspected, but he considered the admission to be self-centred. He probably couldn’t quite justify why this attention was given to him, but soon he would know. Perceptive boy.

“Your Angel Maker has arguably found his peace, though he had to sacrifice his life to do it. Did he fight what was happening to him?”

Will winced slightly. “There’s evidence he was alive for much of what was happening to him and he didn’t have defensive wounds, so no, I wouldn’t say he was fighting it.”

“You said he had brain cancer for the extent of this vocation. It has become an unfortunate slogan amidst advocates that one battles cancer, putting the onus on a patient to overcome what they have no control over. It can be a different kind of courage to give into the horror overtaking you. Illness has a tendency to be ruthless. How is your head?”

Will sunk back in his chair slightly. “It’s had better days. I did want to ask—do you have any ideas? Talk to any doctors?”

“I would suggest a brain scan and I have already talked to a colleague I’d like to refer you to. Even if nothing is found, it would be prudent to rule out a neurological cause.”

Will nodded in agreement.

In truth, Hannibal hadn’t come to a decision about whether or not he should illuminate Will about his diagnosis. There was an easy way to leave it up to fate, though. This time it would be in the hands of the neurologist to practice his competence. Encephalitis was easily missed on a preliminary brain scan, unless one was to be thorough in their work. Hannibal had no qualms about killing Doctor Sutcliffe a second time if he deserved it, and his hands didn’t feel dirty for allowing life to take its course. The typhoon would strike and Nelson Mandela would die and the plane would crash and ebola would ravage and the universe would be forever in its state of increasing disorder, notwithstanding Hannibal’s little miracle, just as it should be. If Will’s brain was meant to set on fire, then so it would be. And just like before, Hannibal wouldn’t let him die.

“You’re sure I don’t have a tumour?” Will asked with a dry smile, pushing up out of the chair. “It could explain why I feel so confused.”

“You don’t have a tumour.”

Will drifted to the other side of the office, setting his sights on the stag statue.

“There are details that no one else should have known about the case, let alone who the Angel Maker was. It barely gained notoriety. But the Copycat and Buddish wouldn’t have been working together. The Copycat is entirely alone.”

Entirely alone. It sounded sad the way Will said it. It had gotten harder to be alone since meeting him.

Hannibal stood up and followed Will across the room. He'd held this man in his arms and tasted his blood. He'd beheld his darkest wrath and he'd seen his most delicate vulnerability. In this moment, there was a breath of innocence and immaculacy from him that only existed before the turmoil.

Hannibal could recognize his own loneliness in Will, but this Will couldn't share in the experience of having loved and then lost it. *Abandonment requires expectation* rang through his head.

"I won't abandon you, Will. You won't have to feel how Elliot Buddish felt, so terrified of sleeping alone that he employed corpses to stand guard. That's my promise as your friend, not as your psychiatrist," he said, as genuinely as he could.

Had he felt secure in being more honest, he might have said family.

He stood just behind Will shoulder and breathed in. He recognized the subtle hints of the feverishly sweet smell of his infection. That scent more than anything made this world feel true.

Hannibal could see the flicker of his pulse at the side of his neck where his skin was dotted with perspiration already hinting at a fever. This Will was utterly real and vibrant, swimming with potential and untainted by resentment.

Will looked over his shoulder and met eyes with him. He enjoyed Hannibal's friendship in this world, and he enjoyed it because of the simple matter of their illuminating conversation. Their relationship may still be lacking, but things were still so utterly sincere.

Will's eyebrows twitched together as another moment passed.

"Are you attracted to me?"

Hannibal's heart leap in his chest, but he schooled his face into one of composure. He took a step back, realizing how close he'd gotten.

"I know that's blunt," Will said, eyes flickering away. "I only noticed now and I, ah, find it's better to put things out in the open than misrepresent it later."

Will turned to face Hannibal, putting a bit more space between them in the process.

"That is understandable, and frankly refreshing," Hannibal replied. "You are an attractive man, with an even more attractive mind. My apologies if I made you uncomfortable."

Will nodded once, looking somewhere around Hannibal's cheek.

"I don't have many friends and I consider you a good one, but I'm not attracted to you in that way." He looked away. "Don't take it personally. My mind doesn't leave much room for amorous thoughts. And…" he cleared his throat, "none for men, that I can detect at least."

Hannibal watched carefully as Will walked away from him. The forthright and earnest rejection at this stage in their relationship was unsurprising, and he felt a little silly for

showing his cards so soon.

It wasn't until there was more honesty between them that Hannibal's attraction for Will had grown to a diverting extent, and that he noticed the hints of reciprocation in Will.

Will's eyes had once dilated when they met Hannibal's in the dim dining room over the meal they made together, and his cheeks were sometimes flushed like he'd run a marathon after their long conversations in his office at night. Hannibal had always thought that sex could have arisen in their routine if it had been one of his priorities, though he never could be certain of Will's. Now after so long apart, it felt like a more pressing priority. Hannibal sighed and then straightened his back.

"No, you're not interested in me," Hannibal agreed. "But you will be."

Will halted in his tracks halfway to his seat and turned back to Hannibal. He looked nothing short of bewildered.

"My, Doctor Lecter, that's bold of you."

Will's face was hard and serious, less flirtatious than it was admonishing, but neither was he outright rude.

"Merely an observation," Hannibal said.

Will hesitated in what Hannibal thought could be insecurity.

"Is there something I said to make you think..?" he asked quietly, trailing off. "I'm not sure if there was a miscommunication here."

"No, Will, there wasn't. I don't believe you feel any type of way."

"Well now I'm *really* confused."

Hannibal smiled. "Please, sit, I will find some literature on angels that may help illuminate the motivations of our killers and we can go back to discussing that instead. Don't let it bother you. I promised to keep things professional, and I keep my promises." Until things beg for more, he thought.

Will watched warily as Hannibal squeezed his shoulder and then climbed the ladder to his books. His hand tingled with the feeling of Will's warm, toned body. *Alive. Here.*

If the flush on Will's cheeks was anything to go by, this putting things out in the air might work in Hannibal's favour to make things a little more interesting.

His next kill would be a risk, but it felt important to stay loyal to his past life. It would be particularly difficult to get to this victim without being seen, so he did what he rarely resorted to and knocked out a few unsuspecting witnesses with force and then with sedatives.

He took their identification and their uniforms and with a few quick outfit changes, he was able to reach the surveillance system, the jail cell, and the nurse's room without being noticed in the halls of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

Abel Gideon was less easy to keep quiet.

“Why, you’re a new mug to look at. Apologies if I seem disappointed, it’s just that the usual night nurse is quite a pretty woman, maybe you’ve seen her around? You see so few pretty things in here.”

Hannibal picked up the pace, leading him away from a few voices he heard. He didn’t fight, clearly picking up on Hannibal’s hints that he would break him out. *It would be most prudent that you come with me now.*

“Not that you don’t have a good face. Those cheekbones that could cut more than a few things—not to mention that Eastern European flair. I bet that’s a hit with the ladies, et cetera. Unfortunate about the lack of braces coverage and fluoridation, though, I see no pearls in that mouth.”

Out of the view of other staff, Hannibal could finally lock them both in the nurse's quarters.

He snapped on his latex gloves and beckoned Abel to the centre of the room.

“It is nice to see you, Abel Gideon. You do not know me, but we happen to be rather similar, at least in your eyes. Tell me, do you consider yourself the Chesapeake Ripper?”

Abel’s face lit up in devious delight. It felt good to be recognized. To have your external self validated as what you feel on the inside.

“If you wish to know my name, I’d like to learn yours,” Abel said.

Abel Gideon was an unsettling reminder of the fallibility of the human mind. Individuals had subscribed to delusions like it was their religion throughout all of human history. It was a difficult bone to chew knowing he was living out a life in the past without a rational explanation for it.

If there were a number of worlds in which anything could happen, what made Hannibal any more the Chesapeake Ripper than Abel Gideon as long as he believed in it?

Well, that one was easy. Hannibal consumed his kills, took their lives into his own. He felt their rippling power in his belly, and he was often hungry.

He stabbed the first IV pole through Abel Gideon’s stomach and watched his eyes pop wide open.

Again and again he stabbed through his fraud, snuffing out the fruition of his meagre recreations before it could begin. He stayed alive for an impressive amount of time, just as he had when he lost his limbs. The signs of an adept conversationalist.

"*Ah.* I don't suppose we have a few things in common, Doctor."

When all of the tools were speared through his body and his heart had stopped, Hannibal set out a tall mirror on the floor and rolled his tableau over until Abel's dead face reflected back up at himself.

He snuck out the back of the hospital, forever free from the bounds of the cages.

Recognition

Hannibal did not sleep that night. There was too much to think about.

He was looking up literature on parallel universes and time travel. Unsurprisingly most of it was fictional, but still he sought the clarity he could.

Earlier that day, he retrieved a number of modern novels out of the library. He had merely smiled at the question from the flirtatious librarian about whether he was getting books for his kids when he checked out a stack of cheesy science fiction books and The Chronicles of Narnia.

The theories did little to bring him clarity to his own situation. He began searching online for first hand accounts similar to his own, but found few that could be corroborated in any manner.

Still no further in his quest than before, he gave up and left for work, buzzing with the anticipation of what would soon be discovered. To his glee, Will called him while he was on the way to the office.

“Hello, Will. What can I do for you?”

“Ripper’s made a reappearance. A rather grand entrance, or so I hear.”

“I see.” Hannibal smiled, pulling his Bentley into his usual spot on the street.

“I’m still on my way there. But actually, I really wanted to check in on how we are.”

Hannibal parked the car. “Oh?”

“You said some things that were pretty out of left field. I don’t know where it came from or if you’ve been feeling… off, but I don’t appreciate it. Whatever those mind games were, it’s not what I need right now.”

Hannibal held his breath for a few moments and then held the phone close to his ear.

“It seems I owe you an apology.”

He wasn’t surprised that the attention upset Will. He also wasn’t bothered to hear he had stepped out of line. It was almost refreshing to hear a pinch of Will’s rage again.

“Look, forget it. Things are piling up and I want to come see you about this kill later and I’d like the conversation to be illuminating rather than giving me additional things to be confused about.”

“Of course.”

“I’m supposed to rely on you for these kinds of things.”

“I know. I don’t want to take advantage of that.”

He could hear the shaky nod of Will’s head against the phone. “Good. Look, I gotta go now. This kill was at the BSHCI, God knows how he got inside. Jack’s all excited that there are more cameras to check, but he won’t find anything. The Ripper would have been meticulous as always.”

“That does seem to be his standard.”

“Goodbye, Doctor Lecter.”

With that, Will hung up and Hannibal got out of his vehicle with a pep in his step. Will still trusted him, but the potential complicated nature of their relationship had been put into his head enough to call Hannibal with his worries.

Hannibal was in a good mood as he unlocked the doors and turned on the lights. He poured his thermos of coffee into a nice mug and opened his itinerary. He sunk into his office seat and stilled his movements as the loneliness of the space overtook him.

Conversations with Will were still enjoyable, but they didn’t sustain him like they used to. There was so much missing from Will in this world. They had not dined together in full awareness of their actions. They had not found each other inexplicably on the other side of the world. Will had not tracked down the secrets of Hannibal that no one had ever so much as bothered to look for. Hannibal had not sliced apart their little makeshift family out of heartbreak.

Things were different after having survived so much together, and being without it made Hannibal appreciate even the most tragic moments of their relationships. He would never live again without knowing the ferocity of their pain under his skin.

It might have been impulsive, but he couldn’t find it in himself to be bothered as he called the later patients of the day and cancelled their appointments. He would consider referring some of them permanently to free up his schedule. He wouldn’t mind replacing all of his patients with new individuals to at least make things interesting again, but it might look strange to anyone that thought to check out his bookkeeping.

Right now his priority was his art, and he wanted more time to stalk Devon Silvestri, which would probably be easy enough to do in the daylight. The next killer of his old world that Will dealt with was Tobias Budge, and he should *really* consider referring Franklyn before he had to hear his sobbing over his passed friend.

He was too impatient to wait for the early killer’s own becomings to be realized. It would be fascinating to see if Will could feel around the corners of the pattern without having any knowledge of the timeline it came from. It was more than he usually killed in such a short period of time, but he felt secure in his chaos when the kills were so seemingly random to any external person.

Hannibal killed Devon Silvestri before dinner time, leaving him in a hotel bathroom with his hands deep inside his chest cavity, pulling out his organs in a messy surgery.

By the time he returned home in the evening with a small cooler disguised in his book bag, Will was waiting on his front step. It looked as though he had just knocked on the door and was about to leave when he saw Hannibal coming up the drive.

“Ah, so you just lock the door when you’re not home?” he teased when Hannibal came close enough. At first glance, he didn’t seem to hold any resentment from their little conflict.

“If I’m home, I can deal with any nuisances coming my way.”

Will put his hand to his chest in faux hurt. “Ouch.”

Hannibal brushed a hand across his bicep as he reached around to unlock the door. “You are not included in that category. I am happy to see you here, especially as I have been excited to try a recipe that is better suited for two.”

“I wasn’t actually trying to get dinner out of you. I tried your office first, but you weren’t there either,” Will said, following Hannibal inside and shrugging off his jacket.

“I do house calls with some more sensitive patients.”

“Hm. Probably none so far as me.”

“I don’t mind the travel.” He recalled the one time he would have been at Will’s place in this timeline. “Your property was very peaceful when I drove there to feed your dogs.”

“I appreciated you doing that, I don’t have many people to help so far out there.”

Hannibal nodded in acknowledgment. “Did you come to discuss the Ripper?”

“I didn’t want to wait until our appointment.”

Hannibal could see Will straining with simmering energy below the surface.

“What have you deduced?” Hannibal leaned forward in interest.

“The Copycat and the Chesapeake Ripper are one and the same,” he said.

Hannibal let his eyes widen slightly in surprise. It had taken Will longer to realize it before, but Hannibal had given him significantly more to work with here in a short amount of time.

“What evidence do you have?”

“That’s the thing—very little. The skill, the theatrics, it’s all very slippery. But I know. I feel it.”

“Have you told Jack?”

“No, not yet. He’ll want evidence first. I wanted to talk it out first.”

“Why, if you are so certain?”

Will leaned against the counter and looked away. “I think my symptoms are only getting worse. I’m not certain how much I can trust in myself.”

“Have trust in my perception of you, if not yourself. I trust you in this, Will.”

Will straightened up.

“It was a wound man tableau. Same as before, but flipped onto a mirror.”

“What is it a reflection of?”

“His past? This patient had no connection to him that we can find so far, but the director of the BHSCI is still being cagey.” Will shrugged. “But I don’t see it. The Ripper’s going through something and no one else is privy to the details.”

“Are they ever? You see through the smoke screen and find the shape of things.”

Will’s voice shook. “Not this time I can’t. It feels…”

“What?”

“Otherworldly.” He laughed dryly. “Which is not entirely new, the Ripper has this… devilish, transcendental way about him, in the mystery of him. He sees the world differently to most people. It almost feels like he’s seeing something new now.”

Will’s jaw flexed with the clench of his teeth and he looked away, seemingly conflicted.

“How is it new?”

Will let out a breath of air. “It’s new because I can’t see it. What I do… I feel quite close to killers. It comes with understanding them, there’s an intimacy in stepping into their shoes, as disturbing as it may be. As much as I might not want to be close.”

“You have lost that intimacy with the Ripper,” Hannibal said, leaning forward with his elbows on the counter.

“I was never that familiar with the Ripper. He hides too well.” Will lifted a dismissive palm into the air.

“It doesn’t always take clarity to feel familiar with another.”

“I suppose not. I feel unsettlingly like the Ripper’s moved on from me. Like whatever I could understand before is no longer his vocation, but the *aesthetic* is there. It’s entirely him, and it’s just going over my head.”

Will tilted his head up to the ceiling as if to catch the meanings flying by like finicky little pixies in the air.

“The fact of that seems to sadden you,” Hannibal commented, grabbing his kitchenware simply to distract his mind with familiar movements.

“I suppose there’s a gratification in figuring him out. He’s so many steps ahead that it’s like you can’t even identify which chess piece it was that led to your demise; it’s buried underneath the pawns, but there’s no mistaking it was a singlehanded blow. It’s an intricate and immaculate play of moves and I could always feel out the edges of it. Not the steps, not the details that would lead us to him, but his intentions were there as I watched from the sidelines.”

He removed and cleaned his glasses. They looked clean enough to Hannibal. Was it Will’s sight failing him?

Will smiled self-deprecatingly and Hannibal’s heart panged for that naive twinkle in his eye. “Dr. Lecter, I’ve lost the plot.”

“Does the Chesapeake Ripper wish to be understood?” Hannibal asked. “What is art if there is no one to appreciate it, not even the person who would know it most?”

Will tilted his head at him, listening.

He looked pointedly at Will. “It is a lonely thing to engage in creation and know it is merely abstraction to everyone else. Some believe that art begs for loneliness, but the Chesapeake Ripper is above all else a performer putting his art on the most public stage he knows how.”

Will looked doubtful. “The killer I’ve known does it for himself. It’s an inside joke; he doesn’t care if other people are on the inside or if they’re the laughingstock. That recognition gives him all the amusement he could need.”

“Unless that is exactly what has changed,” Hannibal said. “If you wanted confirmation that someone could see you for who you are, would you not obfuscate further and hope they climb over your walls regardless?”

Will watched him for a long moment. For a moment Hannibal worried he’d said too much, but Will seemed to sink away from the mere presence of Hannibal and consider it. He would find it to be true, of course, even though Hannibal hadn’t particularly recognized it in himself before.

He wanted Will to prove that he was the man Hannibal loved—that this connection transcended worlds.

“An interesting theory. I will consider it.”

In the end, Will did not say more on the subject. He stayed for dinner and Hannibal enjoyed his easy appetite and the ways their conversations circled, but when he left, the comfort did not last.

Hannibal poured himself a drink and sat by the fire after dinner. He was uncomfortably full and restlessly bored.

Usually at a time like this, he would be sinking into the comforts and delights of his memory palace. The urge was like a muscle memory that took constant effort to resist.

His memory palace was not organized by the simple passage of time as much as the significance of those places and events, but there was still a natural flow within each room.

Now some events weren't so much a memory as they were an unfairly advantaged premonition, and did it make those events real if they only existed in Hannibal's mind?

It would have to be enough. Hannibal had been alone through his deepest trauma and his greatest ecstasies. He had always known that if he was locked away, he would persevere with the memories he had left.

He closed his eyes and leaned back into his chair. He recalled the gentle movement of Will feeling for the latch and stepping deeper and deeper into the places Hannibal would never return to.

He had no rational explanation for their mind's connection. Perhaps he and Will simply knew each other so well that they could anticipate each other's movements to the mere second it happened.

It had led to strange discordant images brought by Will's crossing associations. Hannibal would find himself at the cusp of the Lecter gardens in the smooth leather chairs from his office. He had looked across the dead grass and found Will in a coat with lapels that concealed his skin up to his jaw, smiling deviously across from him. It was cruel to bring Hannibal so close to his first home, and entirely like him to do so.

He was unsure where he would go now. Will had tainted so many places.

As he stepped into the foyer and considered what he might like to see, he felt something.

A presence, as opposed to the ringing absence that he had expected.

He traveled to the Uffizi gallery where Botticelli's *Primavera* hung secure and grand at the centre, to the apartment he kept in Italy, the Norman Chapel and the catacombs beneath, his Chandler House dining room and kitchen, and finally to his dual-levelled office where the fire was already warmly lit.

And there Will stood, his back to Hannibal in all stiff, uncomfortable lines, turning where he was silhouetted by the fire to stare wide-eyed at Hannibal.

Inheritance

Will in his mind was wearing the plain white t-shirt and thin boxer shorts that Hannibal recognized as his sleepwear. His hair was pushed back to reveal the scabbing line halfway across his forehead.

It was not the distant, static nature of a memory he was recalling. Will's eyes were sharp with recognition and knowledge.

"I'm used to hallucinating dead people, but you have been startlingly absent until now. Even when I wanted to see you." Will's mouth stretched in a grimace that was halfway to a smile. "Even when I really didn't."

Hannibal's mouth popped open with effort and he tried to contain his emotions, a dizzying mix of hope and grief.

"Perhaps it's because I'm not really dead, just somewhere else," Hannibal said. "Hello, Will."

"Hi, Hannibal," he whispered. Will blinked against suddenly pink and moist eyes, his left eye twitching closed like it was hard to look at Hannibal. "Somewhere else?" he asked.

Hannibal stepped forward hesitantly, as if the apparition in front of him would disappear if startled. His sight already felt blurry and thick with emotions.

Could this truly be his Will, the man who knew him to the end? He did not know how it could be possible, but he so badly wanted it to be true, even if it meant he'd left behind a world to move on without him.

"What have they done with my body?" Hannibal asked.

"You're still in holding at the morgue."

Hannibal nodded, biting the side of his mouth. It was not what he wanted to become of his body, not the impersonal head wound or the bureaucratic aftercare. Perhaps Jack was aware of how insulting it was.

"And Jack?" Hannibal asked at the thought.

"Dead. Shot by Chiyoh a moment later, and he died in the hospital that night."

Hannibal smiled. "The devil on one shoulder, your God on the other."

"It's awfully quiet these days without the two of you in my ears," Will muttered.

"Have you spoken to Chiyoh?"

"You have a lot of questions for a dead guy."

“I have been regrettably absent as you said,” Hannibal said, then paused. “Is it common for your so-called hallucinations to have such agency?”

Will squinted his eyes. “That’s one way to describe the lack of control I have over what I see. Associations are chaotic when the people they come from are too.”

“Hm,” Hannibal murmured. “You’re not really in this office, are you? Not in those clothes. Do most of your associations infiltrate the spaces you’ve made in your mind? Is this room not barred more than your porous psyche?”

“Most real people don’t infiltrate the spaces in my mind unless I let them, but I can typically guess why you’re the outlier through your sheer force of will and lack of respect for boundaries.”

“Might I remind you that this is my space?”

Will winced. “I guess I assumed it was all up for grabs since your heart stopped beating. The real places are.”

Hannibal paused. He’d mostly avoided considering what he left behind after his death, having no way to really know. But in the case that he truly left that old world behind, his Last Will and Testament would have gone into effect. Without a trial and charge, there was nothing the state could do to claim his assets.

That meant large sums of money were donated to the cultural arts organizations of his choice in America and across the seas. It meant grant trusts were opened for surgical and psychiatric residencies at Johns Hopkins. It meant that a number of colleagues were gifted various physical assets along with little recipe sheets that they would have been made into one day had it been Hannibal’s choice. Aged wine, collector's items, and antiques were sent to those that he knew would cherish them properly.

Only some colleagues would know the true meaning of their inherited items, as was by design. Alana would understand the meaning of the beer-making kits and reserves she’d receive. Bedelia would understand why she retained a property in Florence as thanks and for the memories. Chiyoh, of course, kept the Lecter estate and its treasures and would likely leave them to rot, as was right.

It also meant that his remaining property and his vast collection of actually valuable personal artifacts were left for Will Graham, with those meant for Abigail Hobbs’ future left to pass down to him as well. Even the Italian impressionist paintings left for Jack would come into his care.

At the time he had made the changes, on the cusp of Will’s betrayal, it had bitterly amused him to consider Will left with the massive responsibility of maintaining the dozens of properties and vast collection of art and books and investments that Hannibal kept, but only because it seemed so unlikely that Hannibal would die. Now it was utterly real that Hannibal was gone and Will was left with enough of him that he’d never be able to forget a thing.

“I suppose it is all yours now,” Hannibal said.

“Yeah, I suppose so, huh?” he said accusingly. “I don’t know what you expect me to do with —I mean, *everything.* More money than I’ve ever seen in my life? Multiple *properties?* So much shit I can’t even comprehend… you have armour from the middle ages and more obscure artifacts than I’d find in a museum. Why, just why?”

Hannibal put his arms up at his side. “What’s mine is yours.”

Will scoffed. “I don’t want it. Do you know how long it will take to even give it all away?”

“I have been assured my lawyer would help you as long as his percentage is maintained with every transaction. I hope he is keeping his promise.”

Will crossed his arms and looked away. “I’ve been in contact with him. Your lawyer’s name is really Sawyer? This all has to be one big joke. One big cosmic joke.”

“It does seem like that sometimes, doesn’t it?”

Hannibal walked closer. He so dearly wanted to touch Will, but he didn’t know if it would be accepted. He didn’t know if it would be real enough.

“I hope you will accept it for whatever comfort the financial security offers, even if you leave everything else to decompose or be robbed.”

“It’s the furthest thing from comfort.” Suddenly, Will shook his head. “Why am I even here? What am I doing? I just need to go the fuck to sleep.”

Will was gone as if he never stood there at all. The fire blew out with a puff of smoke and left the coals to twinkle pathetically as they faded to grey. Hannibal’s mind palace felt utterly and surely empty again.

Hannibal slept restlessly that night, dizzy with too much wine, gulped back and unsavoured.

It hurt. This stark ache. Will Graham, the bitter, *changed* man he knew was closer to him than he expected, and it made him feel further away than ever. It hurt to be privy to Will’s grief. It hurt to know he could give him nothing more than everything he’d ever owned before. It hurt to think that Will could leave his mind and move on from Hannibal for good, knowing they could have had some kind of connection in the shared rooms of their minds after all. Perhaps if he’d convinced Will that he was not merely a hallucination, he would have stayed

It hurt to think that none of this might be real. Hannibal, for the first time in a long time, did not feel like he could trust his mind.

He woke up. He went to work. He went through the motions of his day, unsure if any of it mattered, or if any of it was even happening.

At home, he still couldn't relax. Hannibal rewatched the film *A Brief History of Time* chronicling Stephen Hawking and his work. He'd watched it many times before but he thought it might help to refresh his memory with the media that made him so enthralled with the idea of time travel in the first place.

Had he really gone to a parallel universe, months back in time from where he last was? And why here? It suddenly felt so utterly empty of the things he wanted, the *people* he wanted.

On the screen, he watched the teacup fall from the table and smash on the floor. The man's monotone, robotic voice came through the speakers of Hannibal's tablet.

"Where does the difference between the past and the future come from? The laws of science do not distinguish between the past and the future. Yet there is a big difference between the past and future in ordinary life. You may see a cup of tea fall off of a table and break into pieces on the floor. But you will never see the cup gather itself back together and jump back on the table."

The film reversed and showed the cup reassembling itself on the table again. Hawking continued, saying: *"The increase of disorder or entropy is what distinguishes the past from the future, giving a direction to time."*

Hannibal rewrote his equation that he'd been toying with on and off for years now in a notebook on his lap. He drew from astrophysics, particle physics, and string theory, a lot of which he learned from following Hawking's work in mathematical journals.

Hawking had once believed the universe would stop expanding and shrink again, meaning entropy would reverse itself. Later Hawking said he was mistaken.

Hannibal had always kept hope. He dreamed about the expanding universe stopping long before he met Will, for entropy to mend himself, for Mischa, eaten, to be whole again.

When the film stopped, he sat back in his office chair and tapped his fingers on the armrest.

Perhaps it was the unfinished equation sitting heavy in his pocket that had sent him here, but in his last moments on that frozen ground, he had made a single wish. Between general relativity and wormholes and quantum physics, it was comical to think that a simple desire could have been the missing link to time travel, unless it was merely God listening to him.

Perhaps another person would forgive Hannibal for being so single-minded when he only had a moment to think, but Hannibal would never forgive himself. Someone could blame it on him being in love. Perhaps that was a weakness after all.

None of it changed the fact that there was a possibility, ever so slim, that if he wished to be a young child again, he would be back with Mischa. He would have picked her up into his arms and ran and ran and ran far away from that home where—

All his life he worked on that equation for her. Perhaps he already had all the variables he needed, and if he pressed a blade to his own throat he could be granted another wish.

It felt like suicide no matter his justification. Why would he sacrifice the opportunity to live this life to the fullest? He might be given the chance to make another wish when he died again.

He felt equally guilty to know that, had he chosen Mischa instead, he would have been left yearning for Will in that world of the past. The Will who had been through miracles with him—it seemed like this ache was now forever inescapable. He was completely at mercy to his emotions.

It was weighing on him more than he expected to hold regrets and be caught by such unknowns.

He began boiling water before his mind was fully made up. He needed to know the truth of this universe. He needed to know the truth of his mind—that he was just as real, malleable, and *alive* as before.

He carefully measured three grams of psilocybin mushrooms with a kitchen scale and steeped them in tea. He poured himself a single tea cup and squeezed in a splash of fresh lemon juice to maximize its potency.

He'd felt the effects of caffeine, but it was admittedly an imperfect drug to test his functions, being so common in his daily life that he could easily recreate it in his subconscious. He needed something less predictable, less manageable.

Hannibal had experimented with hallucinogens frequently in his youth and occasionally when he needed to take a new perspective in his later adulthood. His preferences fell to psilocybin and mescaline, but he'd experimented with the research chemicals he could get his hands on, observing the differences that arose from simple differences in molecular structure and later combining them with various stimulants.

On the one hand, he considered it a sort of exercise. He never wanted to be caught inhibited and made vulnerable by any psychoactive substances, and so he had to know that he could retain control, even if it meant subjecting himself to substances regularly and intensely enough to grow a tolerance.

On the other hand, drugs challenged him in ways that were invigorating. Hallucinogens in particular required one to give into each and every direction of their thoughts. Trying to reject the sensations and symptoms was a sure way to become lost in a spiral of anxiety and lose control.

Hannibal did not experience anxiety in the typical fashion as others did, having such a high level of confidence in being able to overcome any consequences he faced. Nonetheless, drugs had made him face fear beyond anything he had ever experienced before. It was in the resurfacing of old memories he could not run from that had rendered him most vulnerable. And when he stopped running from the memories, he still survived. It was a reminder that anyone could use from time to time.

The past could haunt you but it did not have to destroy you.

Hannibal checked his watch at his first symptoms—the impression that the walls around him were breathing, the haziness over whether any sharp lines surrounding him really were immobile, and the eery sensation that a sheet had been pulled over his head to echo his thoughts off of one another. He gulped back the saliva that came from sudden nausea and went in search of ginger to make a new tea. Patterns began to arise here too, a spiral in the smooth cut of the ginger root, parallel ripples across the water in his kettle, and a beautiful dancing symmetry in the design of his teacup.

He longed to drop the teacup on the ground before him, recalling the strange moment that Abigail had done just that without knowing the significance of her action.

He forced himself to hold onto the porcelain as he laid on the chaise lounge chair in his sitting room.

After another thought, he set the teacup down and turned on his gas fireplace. He watched the trembling flames for a long minute before his unsettled stomach reminded him to drink his tea.

The sickness passed and a fascinating euphoria settled in place. The art he'd neglected to appreciate after living with it for so long looked beautiful again. He played a song on his harpsichord and closed his eyes to see the movement of the noise in the lights against his eyelids. He turned on the record player so he could live in the music as he relaxed. He thought he might sketch something in a little while.

His visuals were intense and his body and mind were thoroughly stimulated in unmistakeable ways. It was evidence that he was made of carbon and that the firing synapses in his brain were real. The digestion of a substance and the expected reaction in his brain. Life had never felt so vivid and mysterious.

He was real; so were these things happening to him that were entirely unexplainable or undiscovered by humans today. It felt as though Will Graham had brought magic along with his touch of Hannibal's life. The thought brought a smile to his face. It had to be Will.

And for Will, he had to make the most of this. Perhaps in the future, he would have another chance to go back and save Mischa. And maybe, just maybe, he would continue to have access to the Will Graham he fell desperately in love with in another life. His hopes had already manifested into this magnificent outcome.

A ringing pinged through his ears like his skull was a cymbal. It took him a moment to recognize the noise as his doorbell.

The front door clicked open a moment later. There was only one person who regularly let himself into Hannibal's house, too busy thinking about what he wanted to talk about to consider typical norms of privacy. Hannibal liked that Will treated Hannibal's space like it was his own. It was a comfortable thought.

He laid back and waited for Will to find him. The man finally peeked his head around the hallway entrance and breathed out in relief when he found Hannibal by the fire.

“I got so used to seeing you in the kitchen and dining room. It’s strange to see you exist anywhere else.” Will stepped fully into the room, staring in wonder at the more classical decorations. In his kitchen and dining room, Hannibal wanted all attention to be on the feast. In this room, he liked the surroundings to be far more stimulating to encourage interest and mingling.

“The kitchen is the heart of the home; it brings life to guests,” Hannibal said.

“And let me guess,” Will said, walking by the bookshelf and trailing Hannibal’s collection of fiction with a finger. “Here is the brain? All the invigorating post-dinner conversations you could dream of.”

Hannibal tilted his head back to rest and let Will’s words flow through him. He had a lovely voice, a vibrating timber that was so gentle in its natural state and grew shaky like it was going to burst in his passion. Hannibal could only imagine the noises he could elicit from him in a real fight with his hands, if he got the opportunity to witness it one day.

“Some more invigorating than others,” Hannibal said, then lifted a hand to point at the bar in the corner of the room. “Would you grab us a drink? I think you might quite like the 16-year bourbon on the second shelf there.”

Will glanced at the half-drunk teacup left to the ground and then back up to Hannibal.

“Have you already been drinking?” Will asked, conceding and grabbing the bourbon to pour for them.

“No,” Hannibal responded simply.

Will brought him a glass and handed it over but did not let go immediately.

Will stared at Hannibal and Hannibal stared back. Will’s face changed before his eyes, bulging blue reflected with the fire, beard hairs bristling with every twitch of his jaw. His curls waved like a flowing sea around his head and he looked beautiful.

He looked not entirely familiar. Lacking something.

He was also more put together tonight, now that Hannibal thought of it. He’d seen Will dress up many times, but not in this life. His hair was brushed and parted and his shirt had been ironed and left with one additional loose button compared to his usual.

Will reached out and touched the back of his knuckles to the heat of Hannibal’s cheek. Hannibal’s skin tingled at the contact. It almost felt like Will was slipping right into him, but then he pulled back and his hand was intact. He released the tumbler of bourbon to Hannibal’s grasp.

“What is it?” Will asked. He seemed neither concerned nor judgmental, just curious.

“Psilocybin.”

Will huffed. “Is this one of the perks of psychiatry? Confident self-medication?” He looked over his shoulder and found a settee to sit on. He settled down a bit awkwardly, limbs at stiff angles that were exaggerated by Hannibal’s visual hallucinations.

“I admit to experimentation before I became a psychiatrist, but I have since found the use of hallucinogens for therapeutic purposes to be very interesting. I have contributed to some empirical studies myself. I heartily support the nonconventional.”

“I hope you haven’t thought about recommending me. My brain doesn’t need any help in seeing things that aren’t there.”

Hannibal recalled the sting he felt when Will called him a hallucination in his mind palace. He wanted to prove that he still took up space in Will’s world. Real, physical space.

“Are you so certain? It might be just the thing you need to reconsider some associations,” Hannibal said.

“I smoked a joint in college and thought I was going to die. I don’t know about that.” Will turned his glass in hand, leaning forward on his knees and looking at the floor instead of Hannibal.

“The most important element is being in an environment that you feel safe in. If you had the typical college experience then I imagine it was more privy to chaos and instability, whereas I would not let you slip under the influence of anything. Nonetheless, you need not do anything you do not wish to.”

Will nodded at the ground. His entire body seemed to darken in shade.

“Is it inconvenient that I am under the influence at this moment? I assure you I have the capacity to discuss whatever it is that is on your mind, so long as you give me a bit of patience if my mind wanders. What did you come all this way for?”

Will’s cheeks flushed and he shook his head dismissively.

Hannibal squinted his eyes at him. It couldn’t be.

Will’s lips spread in a smile that didn’t reach his eyes and then he looked back down into his drink.

“Just company. If you don’t mind. I can leave you to it if you’d like to just enjoy your night. I don’t know why I don’t call first.”

“Not at all, I’m glad for your company,” Hannibal said as sincerely as he could.

Hannibal observed him through the kaleidoscope imagery of his gaze. Could it be that Will came here to pursue Hannibal? Did laying the groundwork in Will’s mind with a few simple words work that well?

Was it always that easy?

What did he know about Will? He was an undoubtedly lonely man, isolated by the nature of his unique mind and his own shame about his dark thoughts. He kissed Alana Bloom as a clutch for balance and had sex with Margot Verger for much the same reason, or so Hannibal would guess with his hindsight. An affinity for beautiful women certainly, but less than shallow reasons for pursuing the opportunities that literally fell to his doorstep.

Was it so surprising that he would grow interested in Hannibal when Hannibal already made his attraction clear? He wouldn't have reciprocated so quickly when he was still attached to his assumed label of heterosexuality, but Hannibal imagined that he went home and considered his preferences like any open, unbigoted man who was already outside of the bounds of conventionality. It was possible he hadn't even facilitated this night entirely consciously. Hannibal imagined that the simple pleasure of potential companionship with someone who liked *and* understood Will so well was a much preferable topic to ponder on than his dwindling mind.

Perhaps all it would have taken before was a little more affection and a little less deception.

At that point in their relationship the first time around, Hannibal hadn't yet known how badly he would want to be close to Will one day.

But now? Here? It felt almost too easy, undeserved for all the potential they held in another world. Here he could love Will easily and simply, but they were neither of those things. The lies were already starting to make Hannibal feel sick. He wanted Will to *see* him.

Otherwise, Will didn't desire him in the way he wanted.

But how simple and lovely it would be to touch Will's skin, taste his mouth, and hear his noises of pleasure. There was something lovely about this comparatively naive Will, how he would trust Hannibal implicitly. They would be like any other seeking pleasure in each other's bodies, just another way to escape the mundanity of the world.

Perhaps Hannibal lost his gift of patience. He'd never been too sentimental of a man, but things with Will meant more than that.

He at least felt relatively certain that Will wouldn't try to seduce him while he was in this state. Will's initial confidence was already receding before his eyes. He was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of Hannibal while he was under the influence.

"What's it like for you?" Will asked.

Hannibal turned back toward him, almost surprised that Will was still watching him expectantly. He'd gotten lost in thought.

He took a sip and settled further down on his lounger with one leg stretched out and the other bent at the knee.

"The visuals are constant and invasive but happen in a natural flow with the world around us, as if things are finally moving how they should be. I feel a greater level of clarity during

these times, as well as a greater appreciation for the beauty around me. It helps to take a new perspective on things."

Will cradled his drink to his chest and looked around the room as if trying to imagine it.

"That sounds nice."

"I once gave Abigail mushrooms."

Will's eyes widened and he looked mildly concerned. "You did what?"

Hannibal smiled. Dear Abigail Hobbs. She was a tie between them that had only added another layer of intimacy. A shared daughter. He tried not to think about her too often. It was difficult to recall her without the sour taste of guilt and regret of what he'd done in his past life.

He supposed that even if he'd failed to bring save Mischa, he had the chance to give Abigail a different path and right his wrongs. He didn't love her like he did Mischa, but he appreciated her influence and the way she brought him and Will together. There was peace to garner in that.

"To use under my supervision, of course," he continued. "She did well. There always runs the risk of panicking under such a mind-altering substance, but alternatively, it can be used to access traumatic memories and subsequently replace them with more positive associations."

"And what did Alana think of that?"

"Well on that note, I'd appreciate your discretion." Hannibal smiled mischievously at Will.

Will smirked back. There was a simple joy to sharing secrets.

"Abigail sure could use some more positive associations."

"And so could you. Each killer you connect to, each body you find, there is a steadily growing pile of trauma that changes you. It doesn't need to touch you so deeply, if you only learn to recognize your own power and control in each of those relationships."

"I thought I should be the one all drugged up for receiving therapy, not the therapist," Will said. Humour as avoidance tactic, Hannibal noted.

"I suppose it is difficult for me to turn off, but you're right, better to enjoy the evening than dwell on the things we have an hour a week set aside for."

"And an upcoming brain scan that could do a world of difference if I get some answers." Will lifted his glass in a cheers-ing motion, but his body language and expression did not suggest that same hope.

Hannibal wondered if Will would get the answers he needed. He still planned to leave it up to Dr. Sutcliffe to diagnose Will the best he could.

He also wondered what the Will in his memory palace would think of Hannibal yet again influencing a naive version of himself, just as he'd gone through. He hoped that Will would know by now that Hannibal only wanted the best for Will, and that these things took time.

Relatively confident that they had reached a lull in the conversation and that Will was not the kind of man to mind sitting in silence, Hannibal closed his eyes and opened his mind to the lively and vivid rooms he held in his imagination.

There was a familiar, warm presence there.

He was in his same sitting room, fire still blazing away and decorations morphing in their unique ways, with his own familiar Will standing with his back to Hannibal.

Hannibal had doubted that Will would be back so soon, but he hoped. Oh, he hoped.

"What is this? What are you on?" Will asked right off the bat, a parrot to earlier. Except this time, Will was seeing exactly what Hannibal was seeing. He stared at each corner of the room in wonder at the art and patterns in Hannibal's mind. It breathed in time with them, lulling Hannibal into the contentment that often came from having Will close by.

"Psilocybin," Hannibal said and pursed his lips, considering the urge he had to be entirely transparent right now.

"You wouldn't know what it's like," Hannibal continued. "You're afraid of how you would respond to hallucinogens. You once smoked a joint in college and thought you were going to die."

Will turned his head so Hannibal could see his profile. "And when did I tell you that?"

"A few minutes ago, in an entirely different time. I meant it when I told you I'm somewhere else, Will. Somewhere else, not dead." He looked straight into Will's eyes. "And not a hallucination."

Will turned around completely and assessed Hannibal with clear trepidation.

This Will seemed to shift all the air around him with his impact on Hannibal's space. It was breathtaking. The urge to be close to him was almost unbearable, rising saliva to the top of his throat and pulling his trapezius muscles forward. Hannibal made himself stay in place like he had so many times the urge had come to just *take.*

"I thought I felt…" Will gulped. "But how could I ever know if it's true? Whatever you say to try and convince me could have been made up in my own head. I know you too well. I know myself too well."

"I know," Hannibal said, putting his arms up in submission. "So look at me and tell me if you believe me."

Will did, raking up and down his body with uncertain eyes and furrowed eyebrows. Hannibal's body seemed to ripple under his gaze.

When Will finally spoke again, his voice was weak and shaky.

“This could be a kind of wishful thinking that really fucks me up. Thinking the serial killer who I saw die with my own two eyes is still alive, but only in my own mind? A delusion like that would certainly make me belong in an institution. No therapist would want me to listen to what I’m seeing in my head.”

“Good thing I’m your therapist instead,” Hannibal said, winking. “And I’m a strong proponent of the nonconventional.”

Will scoffed and turned away.

“Where are you then?” Will asked. “Actually, no. I don’t know if I want to know. If what you said about hearing it from me is true…”

“It may be prudent to take time to process,” Hannibal agreed. “I only ask one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t stop coming back here.”

Will gulped. “I don’t think any therapist would think this was very productive for dealing with my *grief*.”

Hannibal smiled despite the avoidance. Will would need to see Hannibal in just the way that Hannibal needed to see Will.

“I’ll see you soon, Will,” he said, and then opened his eyes to his warm living room.

“Where’d you go just then?” Will asked next to him, shyer and less certain than the one he was just speaking to.

“Hm?”

“You seemed… absent. Like you were somewhere else.”

“Ah.” He put an arm behind his head and smiled. “Just lost in thought.”

Potential

Will left shortly after and for that Hannibal was admittedly grateful. He was not present with him, not truly. He tried not to linger on the uncertain disappointment evident in Will's body language.

He enjoyed the peak of his trip by sketching Will. The page was a jigsaw of his features, the strong curve of his calf to the tendon behind his knee, the dip between his pecs that rose in the textured xylophone of his ribs, and the way his ears stuck out beyond the tufts of his hair. Strong arms, deft hands, thin hips pressed tight with his belt. He followed it up with a sketch of his entire form, nude and facing his backside while Will peered upward seeing something no one else could see.

He may have used more creative liberty in the surreality of his vision than usual, but he thought it appropriate.

His high lessened until it came like a wave with steadily lengthening gaps between visual hallucinations and the heady feeling he was growing used to. He felt almost normal by the time he got ready for bed, taking care to wash and moisturize his skin and slip on his best silk pyjama set. He enjoyed this time on the immediate offset of his high when his mind and his body were settled. It allowed him to experience any pleasures with an enhanced awareness of his senses.

He opened the thin middle drawer in his closet. It was a velvet-lined watch drawer built to his specifications, fitted instead for luxury-grade toys.

After a moment's consideration, he selected a simple prostate massager and disregarded the more fanciful tools. He'd rather hold onto the simple euphoria of speaking to Will in full clarity than distract himself with fantasy.

He climbed into bed with a jar of lube and let his legs fall apart, spreading them enough to reach his hand down between. He had the lights dimmed low and his stereo playing gentle, sensual music. He could still smell the enduring, cheap product scents of Will if he focused.

He squeezed a hand around himself while he circled his rim with his fingers, sighing out with the heavy rise and fall of his chest. He was no stranger to indulgence, but he'd been too distracted for such pleasures in recent days. He typically masturbated frequently and extensively, pushing his limits when he could. He did not spare himself from any of life's endless joys, and he rarely tired of such pleasures. There was no pretence when he was alone, just him and his sometimes unconventional desires.

He pushed inside of himself, curling his fingers up greedily. He imagined Will's hands on him, sturdy and weathered from work; calloused and clearly capable. His fantasies of Will, not that he opted to dream so often when the real Will was nearby, had ranged from the simple and sweet to the kind of debauchery even he would be shy to share. At some point, Will had become everywhere and everything to him.

He pushed the vibrator inside of himself easily, tilting it to press more firmly against his prostate, and then let up a bit to ride the wave of growing pleasure.

Hannibal would enjoy Will so thoroughly. He would bleed for Will and beg for Will if he wanted it. He would take him in his mouth and pleasure him until he couldn't move his jaw anymore.

If only Will knew all that Hannibal wanted to do to him.

He could only imagine the fantasies that Will might engage in knowing how his beautiful mind worked. Past all the repression and guilt, Hannibal wanted to know exactly what Will wanted and deliver it in droves.

It might not be too difficult in this world. He could have Will pliant and trembling with only a few words, if his last observation was accurate. Will was merely desperate for connection and comfort after the weeks of stress his body and mind had been through.

The Will of his memory palace, however, would be more difficult. That man craved reparation before sentiment. He would not lay down so easily, nor surrender the barriers he'd worked so hard to raise. He would know exactly how to push Hannibal's buttons.

Hannibal stroked his cock in long, attentive movements. He imagined the versions of Will on either side of him. Pliant and receptive; defiant and vindictive. A man so amorphous he could sink into him, and one so blazing he burned it all away.

And neither of whom were here with him. He wanted something to fill the ache in his chest.

He always kept a relative level of separation from his mind's palace. It was important to keep the boundary between reality and memory strong, lest he forget what belonged where. But if he focused enough, he could feel around the latch and sense the presence inside; he could send shockwaves of his pleasure into the rooms and speak his desire in a way that he could still defend.

Will's presence lingered. So much for the time apart to think. Clearly, Will wanted him near just as much as Hannibal wanted him.

He did not go to him. He remained in the liminal space of associations and emotions and felt it echo back to him.

His cock spurted warm ejaculate over his fist and he thrust the prostate massager inside himself to milk himself through it. The vague knowledge of Will surrounded him, stimulating him from his goose-bump-raised skin to the synapses of his nerves.

He sank down in the bliss of well-needed, aching satisfaction, coated in a thin sheen of sweat. Human. Alive.

The presence in his mind disappeared before he knew it. Will would clutch to his plausible deniability and Hannibal would allow it.

For the time being.

The next day, Hannibal turned to distractions so he wouldn't be tempted to re-enter his memory palace too prematurely when things were still so fragile. There was only one thing these days that stimulated him so completely to turn his mind away from such things.

Tobias Budge was the next killer that Will had come upon in his life, and Hannibal had every intention of following this order in his own tableaus of symbolic killings. Nonetheless, this one gave him pause.

He had inserted himself into the discovery of this deadly musician and steered Will toward certain danger. At that time, he'd still been so ignorant of the extent of Will's potential. Of course, if Will had died at Budge's hand, it would have told him all he needed to know. But he didn't die. He had survived every trial that came his way.

It was hard to imagine the empty, uninteresting world Hannibal would be living in if it had gone differently, never having learned what they could have been.

If he sent Will after Tobias today, would it have the same outcome?

Hannibal had never subscribed to fate as his primary belief system. Beyond simple potential and capability, the determination of life and death was often simple coincidence. A mere misstep or a poorly made choice in the course of one's life could change everything.

He found the potential for death at any moment to be motivating rather than paralyzing. Occasionally life fell in a domino effect of causes that were more pleasing than what Hannibal could have orchestrated with his own hands.

He could wipe the world of another threat in Will Graham's way, but he would be removing an important test from their early days.

What was it that made Will who he was? What effect did Hannibal's interventions have on him? Was he exactly who he'd always been? These were the questions that had plagued humanity for millennia. No amount of research could bring certainty.

He resisted his near-constant urge to enter his memory palace and find the man he had no doubts about anymore. This Will that he knew with no question, who had far exceeded the potentials Hannibal had observed in him.

He was giving himself and Will some much-needed time to process.

He had much to consider. He sought out Lawrence Wells in the meantime. The totem pole killer and his son were of little significance to him apart from marking the onset of Will's worsening symptoms, sparked by the scale of its brutality.

Hannibal already saw his new vision in his mind—a bloody recreation of Medea killing her son as revenge for her husband leaving her.

The kill went smoothly, the man too old and cocky to realize he was being disarmed before it was too late, and the son too ignorant to realize the threat. Hannibal presented them on the beach where his other bodies were discovered. The sand absorbed their blood, tracing a path downward, an arrow pointing to the rest of the bodies. He took a slab of meat from the breast of each of them.

Pleased with his work and without further diversion, he re-entered his memory palace at last.

The first thing he noticed when he stepped inside was that things were curiously tilted, and a little blurred at the edges. He let the presence of company draw him into Will's chosen setting until he was in none other than his little farmhouse.

The dogs were sleeping on their beds in the dim light. Will took up an old armchair in the dark corner, cradling a tumbler of whiskey.

That explained the hazy atmosphere.

"Have you been making a habit of drinking alone?" Hannibal asked, recalling the space around him.

"Well I'm not alone anymore. I have my…" Will looked him up and down, fidgeting where he sat in the chair. "Ex-psychiatrist and… arguably arch-nemesis friend who is dead but lives in my mind here to keep me company."

"It is good to see you, too," Hannibal said, pacing a curious loop around the room. His house was messier now, disorganized in ways that did not fit with Will's usually purposefully cluttered space. The dogs made it feel only slightly more lively.

"You've made rooms in your mind for your dogs," Hannibal commented.

"Yeah, and I probably should have stopped at them."

"Do you get many individuals intruding on the spaces in your mind?"

Will looked pointedly at Hannibal with an almost maniacally amused expression. "You could say that."

Hannibal returned his grin a bit uneasily. "This space that we're in—is it at all indistinguishable from where you are in your real world?"

"Yeah. You're here," Will said, and Hannibal was surprised to find that there were suddenly tears in Will's eyes.

Hannibal stopped in front of him.

"You've been in our shared spaces every time I have deigned to check. Do you ever leave?"

"Is this an interrogation?" Will asked.

“Only realizing that I might need to be more worried about your mental health than I was before.”

“*Hah*,” The volume of Will’s voice nearly made Hannibal startle. “My mental health—what has ever been wrong with my mental health? I thought it was the most interesting thing about me.”

Hannibal kneeled down until he was closer to Will’s eye level.

“Your mind is what makes you unique despite your pathology. I may believe a bit of madness is medicine for the modern world, but I have always wanted you to be mentally *well.* I certainly have never wanted you to drink yourself to death or dissociate from the real world to this extent. This is not healthy, Will.”

“Did you hear me when I said ex-psychiatrist? You can’t very well be my doctor when you’re dead.”

“I want you to take care of yourself.”

Will scoffed and looked away, wiping his wet cheek with the side of his hand.

Hannibal suddenly regret not coming sooner. He assumed he’d still be fighting through Will’s bitterness and emotional distance, but clearly things had changed since Hannibal left that world. Or perhaps it was this new discovery of their regained connection that he was struggling to come to terms with.

It was with bittersweetness that Hannibal considered Will grieving for him. As much as it validated that he was not alone in his feelings, it was ultimately a tragic separation for them both.

“You are never alone,” Hannibal said. “Not while my heart continues to beat, in one world or the other. I admit that I was keeping my distance, but only because our last conversation in your house was not the warmest.”

Will chuckled short and self-deprecatingly. “When I said I wouldn’t miss you?”

“There is comfort in the potential of life among us. Even with distance, one’s mere presence can overlay the world to create sight and colour and sound more vibrant than before.”

Hannibal considered how true that had rang before his sister was taken from him. The world had been stripped of saturation with her death. He couldn’t even bear to speak at first, his voice ugly and wrong when she wasn’t there to hear it.

Will nodded. “The world is entirely different without you in it. Eerily still, like the ominous silence before a collapse.”

“Do you believe me when I say I am still here with you?”

“What do I have to lose? More of my sanity?” Will grimaced. “I think I do, against all rationality. It’s something like the striking of a great God when you arrive, defying all means

of what security I have in my mind, and it's not so easy to recreate your flavour of mayhem. That's got to mean something."

Still kneeled down, Hannibal scooted closer and held out his hand. Will stared at it for a long moment before shifting his weight onto his left side and reaching out. His hand closed in on Hannibal's hesitantly and then finally slid onto his palm, overlocking between Hannibal's pointer and thumb.

"Feels real, does it not?" Hannibal asked.

Will lowered their hands to rest on his knee and kept them there.

"That it does," he muttered, blinking slowly.

Will fell asleep in his armchair, his face red and blotchy from the alcohol and tears. His hand loosened around Hannibal's until he could slip away without disruption. He drifted away wishing he could leave Will with a glass of water and a blanket over his legs.

Hannibal slept for the last few hours of the night that he had and then left his bed feeling invigorated yet melancholy. It had been unsettling to witness Will in so much outward distress, but he felt better knowing that now that he was aware of it, he could approach Will differently. It gave him a new purpose apart from this new world. He had always thought Will's therapy ended too prematurely and more progress could be made. It would come with time.

He began making breakfast, working mostly on autopilot as he opened his mind yet again to Will. Taking inspiration from Will, he saw his kitchen in his mind, cluttered just so to fit the real world, cooking with such precision that he could anticipate each stage of cooking in and out of his mind at once. It felt as though he was bringing Will into his new world with him.

"You're back already," Will said, awake now but drowsy and rather pale with his hangover.

"Of course I am. I wanted to see how you were feeling."

"Like shit, what did you expect?" Will walked closer to the stove where Hannibal was beginning to cook a Kashmiri masala hash with crispy egg and miso hollandaise. "I think if I could taste a bit more of your cooking right now that I would feel better though."

"Smell is the most vivid sensory memory we have. Take it in and it will be like you are here in reality. But please, do fill your stomach with real food soon."

Will stood at the side and breathed in deeply. "How is this possible?"

"It's real to me and so it is real to you. Perhaps I could share its taste with some concentration. We share a mind, Will, and I don't believe we've appreciated that fact well

enough."

"Because I don't understand it. It would be easy to explain away by an overactive imagination on both our parts, but I think we both know this is more than that."

"I think it's more likely that magic follows you, my dear."

"Why me? You're the one a segment of the masses has very confidently decided is the spawn of Satan."

"And you're the one who draws in and connects to the monsters of the world, devilish or otherwise."

"Sounds more like a fairytale and not the thriller I've been stuck in my entire life."

Hannibal lifted a lick of hollandaise to his mouth to taste and deemed it acceptable. "Fairytales are defined by their vivid senses. That is what the world is like next to you."

Will turned away and leaned against the counter, ignoring the compliment.

Will needed to shower; he still smelt like alcohol and the armpits of his white shirt were stained yellowish. Somehow Hannibal didn't find it off-putting in the slightest.

"You know, you don't need to come here and check in like this. I take care of myself. My dogs rely on me too much to not. I have a lot to make up to them after leaving for so long."

"I assure you that I simply wish to be near you. That was never the issue."

"No, I guess it wasn't. Maybe I'm just embarrassed that you caught me so drunk and emotional. It's all a little blurry, which doesn't help."

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about. You are quite articulate while intoxicated."

"'Swear my dad could quote entire chapters of Moby Dick while drunk, and *only* while drunk. Random songs, too. Something in those Graham genes that makes us smarter when we're smashed to all hell."

Hannibal chuckled. "Impressive. I can't imagine what you could quote yourself."

"I adopted some Moby from him too. And don't ask, the answer is no."

"That's a hard thing to refrain from," Hannibal said, but ultimately turned back to his food and let it go.

"You'd have to get me drunk enough." His mouth lifted at the corner. "There might not be a pissing contest in our future but how about a drinking contest? Like you couldn't recite the Divine Comedy while you're on your ass."

Hannibal found he couldn't keep the smile off his face as he tried to focus some of his energy on not burning the food. "I likely could—if I ever allowed myself to get that inebriated. I

could not in good conscience enable you to drink that much."

"A nice excuse to not admit that I'd drink you under a table."

"Oh, I don't doubt you could," Hannibal said in good humour.

Will laughed, but then his mood fell before Hannibal's eyes, darkening the very room.

"But there are limitations to this, aren't there? We might be real, somehow, some way, but all of this—" Will gestured to the room around them "—isn't. This is a product of our memories, no matter how precise those may be. I am not standing in your kitchen and I cannot really eat your food."

"But is perfect precision not indistinguishable from the real world in many ways? I do mourn that I cannot truly fill your belly, but consider our advantages. In our minds, we have complete freedom to show each other what we would like. We are not restricted by the bounds of the physical world here."

Hannibal turned down the heat on his food so that it would simmer and not burn.

He stepped in front of Will and put his hands on either side of his face. Will froze in place, neglecting to breathe for a long moment.

"We are not restricted to the places we have been together here." The world around them changed until they were no longer in Hannibal's kitchen but in a grand room painted from floor to ceiling. Hannibal's voice echoed through the room. "I can take you through the Sistine Chapel to admire each brushstroke without the crowds to bother us."

The world changed yet again to a comparably minimalist space with framed paintings as far as the eye could see. "Or more close up in the Louvre. Any place I have fallen in love with enough to memorize, I can show you."

The world around them changed so drastically that Will startled and stepped out of Hannibal's grasp to look around. Wind thick with the scent of sea salt whipped their hair around their foreheads.

Hannibal raised his voice so that Will could hear him over the weather. "A spot on the West coast of France where I spent a summer sketching and reading and swimming; one of the most peaceful times of my life."

Will's mouth fell open in wonder and Hannibal bloomed with gratification that he was able to elicit such an emotion in him. In the next second the scenery changed again to a more peaceful landscape amongst rolling hills.

"Just over there is the Teide Observatory in Spain. I came here once to see the stars," Hannibal said wistfully.

As Will was turning in a circle to take in the landscape, Hannibal imagined his Baltimore kitchen again and stepped up to the stove to resume cooking his breakfast.

“I don’t know whether I feel impressed or nauseous,” Will said, putting out a balancing hand on the counter.

“There are dozens more places in my mind that I can show you, all in due time.”

“Still not really real though is it? Even the most precise recollections can never be fully accurate to the way the world changes.” Will said.

Hannibal frowned. He wanted Will to feel the same magic of their situation that he did. If he could love Will to this unbearable extent even here, then of course it was enough. Maybe in time he would show him. He’d only meant to give him a taste of what they could have.

“Come now. Why don’t you make yourself some food and we can sit together to eat,” Hannibal said, turning away and trying not to give too much weight to the melancholy that filled the space.

Facsimile

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

People easily and often identified Hannibal as a hedonist and they would not be entirely wrong, but so too did he consider a level of restriction vital to appreciate certain pleasures in full.

He ascertained that Will would never seem less beautiful to him no matter how long he indulged in their time together. The exception to Hannibal's rule, as he often was. Will Graham turned him into a man of extremes.

He spent hours with his mind lingering in their memory palace, building rooms, and sharing space with Will as they went on about their days. He became practiced at multitasking both worlds, even being able to talk to Will as he analyzed his patients. It was an easy and arguably not *un*ethical repository to vent about the individuals he came across. Will seemed to hold less resentment for Hannibal now, and their conversations returned nearly to the ease that they once were, with some healthy avoidance. Hannibal supposed that it was hard to crave vengeance against someone who was already dead and gone.

After a few days sharing the same familiar places, Will brought him to stand before a wide, ranch-style house with cracked and curling roof shingles. Will's memory of the southern Louisiana sun beat down on them uncomfortably even in their minds. Will stood before the entrance for long minutes as he recalled the details.

He'd described it to Hannibal as his most constant home from his childhood. He and his father stayed here for a few years during Will's most formative preteen years, and it clearly had a lasting impact on him. It was rock solid and enduring compared to the various houseboats he could never quite rely on to settle in.

They had been discussing the fallibility of memory. Will was still in the process of building rooms in his palace. All the things he didn't want to forget, and well, it seemed only natural that they share this too when the rest of their minds overlapped until every space became one and the same.

"Would you like to go inside?" Hannibal asked.

Will shook his head. "Another time. This was a lot to remember already."

"Your memory is remarkably vivid," Hannibal complimented. "I typically construct my rooms in the moment. Hardly ever so many years after."

"You use your memory palace as a sort of mnemonic device, don't you? My memory would be better characterized as eidetic, though it doesn't always mean it's entirely reliable. And it doesn't exactly allow me to forget the images I wish I could."

“Memory can be a curse as much as it is a comfort. It is dangerous to remember too much. I can build my memory palace to infinity, but it is far more complicated to demolish certain paths.”

“Repression is protection.”

“To an extent.”

Hannibal turned toward him, but Will looked away and nodded toward the house.

"You know what made this place feel most like a luxury? Two fridges. One in the kitchen for food, one in the garage for beer. After all that time cramming things in compact gas kitchens..."

"The availability of sustenance marks a true home," Hannibal said.

"It sure left room for gluttony," he muttered, frowning at the house. "Let's get back."

Hannibal kept his eyes on Will as the setting changed around them until they were back in Will’s farmhouse with the dogs. Will was gone and back in a moment with a bottle of beer, sitting in his usual armchair across from Hannibal.

He tapped his fingers on the armrest a few times. Hannibal could sense something stirring below the surface before Will finally spoke aloud.

“I have happened to notice there are some places in your palace that we tend to… keep a wide berth from, so to speak.”

Hannibal shifted where he sat. It wasn't what he'd expected, but it was clear Will was talking about *Hannibal’s* first, most formative home.

“You are already well aware of these places," he said.

“On the surface maybe. When it comes to you and me, that’s hardly knowing at all.”

“You have already entered these places and made them your own. What more could you want to know?”

“You speak of it like a giant pit of darkness we might fall into.” Will turned toward the window. “But there’s nowhere we go in here that I don’t see it in my periphery.”

Hannibal turned with him and caught sight of the coal-black castle out Will’s window, an unmistakeable mass even through the blinds. It blocked out the sun and, momentarily, all warmth. He turned back to Will quickly, feigning casualness.

“The irony of mental demolition is the more you try to forcibly push away the dreaded image, the more it becomes embedded in your mind. I do my best to try not to embed it further, and I hope you do not intend to make that more difficult for me.”

He looked at Will pointedly. By Will's wary gaze back, Hannibal assumed that he caught the threat beneath his words. Certain things were not to be tampered with. There were sections of the past that needed to lie sleeping in their crypts, no matter how tantalizingly deteriorated the latch seemed.

"Good," he said to Will's silence. "Then let us move on to nicer things."

The Will in his mind left him energized yet mildly distracted through their time together. He made excuses for his other social commitments, isolating himself more than he ever had before. He was almost frazzled to find that Will's—*real* Will's—therapy appointment had come at last.

He slipped out of his mind until he could feel the presence in his memory palace no more.

"Will. Please, come in," he said to the man in the waiting room.

It was a little unsettling to see Will enter his physical space so naturally, clad in his grey sweater over plaid and army jacket in arm. Here was both a stranger and an imposter at his doorstep, a facsimile of the man he knew. Hannibal composed himself as best he could.

"There was another one," Will began, rubbing his eyes as he sat. "Another two. More than that, really. It's been a busy few days."

Hannibal waited for him to continue.

"Two bodies, shared DNA—a father and son—but no social connections. An affair kept secret by the mother, who married someone else…. which is only the tip of the iceberg in which each chip reveals another shallow grave frozen in time." Will rubbed between his brows. "It's a lot of chasing people around right now."

"Not usually your forte."

"No, it's really not—filling in endless dots that lead us nowhere significant and I don't know how to make sense of it all."

"You don't understand the killer?" Hannibal asked.

Will stared past his shoulder toward the door. "It's not just any killer, it's *him.* Jack doesn't think so, but I at least am certain in this. He's not showing me what he's doing—or the FBI. I know there's something there, some connection, it just keeps slipping out my fingers when I try to grasp it." His voice shook slightly. "It's getting pretty damn frustrating actually."

Hannibal considered the obscurity of his recent tableaus. He was exercising his omnipotence in this world and it was cathartic to deny each killer their evolutions before they came to

fruition, but he'd alienated Will because of it. Whatever response he'd wanted from Will, it hadn't come.

He quickly changed the subject. "I have not received the results from your brain scan yet. Did Doctor Sutcliffe offer any insight after you met with the neurologist?"

Will shook his head. "Saw nothing out of the ordinary when I was there."

Hannibal schooled his face into an appropriately thoughtful expression. Fate had not been kind to Will. He'd neglected to accompany Will to his appointment so he wouldn't be tempted to interfere, but he'd also lost an avenue in which he could guide Will to his diagnosis.

Doctor Sutcliffe would pay the price for his incompetence.

"I am truly sorry to hear that, Will. It can be validating to find answers. Diagnosis allows direction that a blank space does not."

"The nightmares are getting worse; I barely sleep because of it. I can't focus on work and focusing doesn't seem to do much good anyway. So no, nothing seems to be going very well for me these days."

Hannibal was saddened to see Will—of *both* worlds—be caught by such depression. Hannibal had little control over the circumstances of the world he'd left behind, but here he'd inadvertently taken away the one sense of stability Will had in being able to understand and catch the killers that plagued him.

The process to self-acceptance was not always an easy one and he would do what he had to do for Will, but he wanted happiness to be an effect of it. He knew his potential would explode into shimmering light if only he could find that peace.

"Have you eaten dinner yet?" Hannibal asked.

"Hm? No, not yet," Will said.

"It sounds to me like you've had a week of being unsuccessful at your job, feeling mentally and physically debilitated, and dealing with disheartening news from the doctor."

Will coughed out a weak laugh. "Oof."

"I doubt that sitting through a tiring therapy session is what you need right now."

Will looked up at him with wide, almost hopeful eyes. Hannibal was offering him a reprieve from the misery of his life, something he desperately needed.

"Come to mine for dinner and let us spend some time on nicer topics. Consider it this week's therapy. You just may need it after the day you've had."

"A free pass from my friend, the psychiatrist?"

“Exactly that, assuming it helps you to be agreeable without guilt.”

“Yeah, okay. I don’t need any more convincing than that.”

They drove separately for the ease of parting ways at the end of the night. Hannibal pulled out first, admiring the steadily dimming sky that was more of a brush stroke across the sky than a splatter of colours. He may have seen this sky before, if he had thought to look when he first lived through this period in time.

His Will remained a year ahead of him in the future. One day he would look up at the sky that Will saw first and wonder if he thought it was beautiful too.

It was strange; the Will in his mind suddenly felt more real than anything around him. He held a greater attachment to that world than this new place he lived in, however perfectly they may have paralleled each other. Hannibal was different and so he didn’t quite belong.

Another unsettling reminder of how one’s sense of reality was more subjective than anything.

He might have gotten it all wrong. The Will in his memory palace could be a hallucination created as a coping mechanism for Hannibal lost in this world. All the time he spent convincing Will of their reality may have only been him convincing himself. Already he had found himself increasingly lost to that fantasy world and neglecting the one he walked through with his eyes wide open.

He pulled up to his house feeling uncertain and untethered. He craved the companionship in his memory palace, but held himself back. It felt almost cruel to replace one Will with the other after finding such intimacy in his mind. He had always prided himself on ‘living in the moment,’ as one would say.

He left his vehicle when Will’s Volvo pulled up and approached his front door in time to hold the door open for him. It was time to give this world some of his attention and re-centre himself.

Hannibal gently grabbed the collar of Will’s jacket for something to do with his hands. Will was initially unresponsive, but then he turned around so Hannibal could slide the coat over his shoulders and off his arms. This close behind him, he could see the hairs on the back of his neck raise.

He turned and hung up his coat like he’d seen nothing and Will adjusted his clothes with some fidgeting.

“Please,” Hannibal said, gesturing toward the kitchen. Will did after only a moment. Hannibal was well-practiced with being a gentleman, but Will was clearly unfamiliar with being on the receiving end of such attention. Until now, Hannibal had resorted to treating them as equals and in a more casual manner to make Will comfortable.

He was certain that Will would notice the difference. He wasn’t quite sure what outcome he was hoping for tonight, but he knew he was curious about certain things. It was something of an indulgence to treat Will a bit kinder. Give a little affection and he might gain some back.

In the kitchen, he quickly set up a space for Will to work as sous-chef. This was something they could never do in their minds. If anything between them was still authentic, it was his ever-constant urge to feed Will.

“As autumn is about to leave us, I’d like to make what one might call a comfort dish. Our main is a roasted breast of mallard with crispy leg, pumpkin soup, and roasted chestnuts. The deep, rootsy flavours of the chestnut and pumpkin combine well with the rich duck and crunchy panko breadcrumbs. I have prepared some of the ingredients in advance, if you would simply chop the onion, then separate the orange into its segments while retaining the juice, and peel the chestnuts. With your assistance, we will be done in no time.”

Will took his place, then tossed the knife between his fingers to twirl the blade through the fluorescent kitchen light. The action was playful and Hannibal found his gaze lingering as he matched Will’s mischievous smile.

He turned on some music and fiddled with the dial until it was just loud enough for Will to feel acceptable to work without the expectation of chatter. He began preparing their ‘duck’ with fatty pieces of meat cut from Abel Gideon, breathing in the aromas of their shared work.

“And finally, a caramelized *pain perdu* with homemade vanilla ice cream for dessert. Come, let’s have it in the sitting room where we will be more comfortable.”

Will looked thoroughly content with delicately hooded eyes and a lingering happy quirk of his mouth. Hannibal was proud he could achieve such a feat with a good meal, especially for someone like Will. He hoped to ease the tension in his shoulders even further with dessert and his Anatolian coffee mixed with cognac and cherry liqueur.

Will chose the couch and Hannibal followed the cue for closeness and sat next to him. He already had the fire rumbling away comfortingly before them.

“This is incredible,” Will complimented, licking his lips. “I haven’t eaten nearly this good in a while.”

“I am happy to see you with the appetite.”

“It comes and goes. Your cooking is usually pretty effective at convincing my stomach.”

“And in turn, you are an effective inspiration for me to cook new dishes,” Hannibal said. He gave into an urge and placed his hand on the nape of Will’s neck. With his thumb and forefinger, he began rubbing circles into the muscle that rose from the top of Will’s spine to the base of his hair. Soft tufts of hair tickled the back of his hand.

“What, I’m your food muse?” Will asked with amused skepticism. He tilted his head forward and his eyes fluttered closed with pleasure. He reacted with the sensitivity of a man who was

not often given affection.

“Do you know the origin of the word muse?”

“The daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne,” Will said. “The ‘inspirational goddesses.’”

“They were thought to make people forget their pain and obligations, allowing them to turn to art and science unobstructed, ‘the key to the good life.’ You are my muse in many ways.” Hannibal thought of all the flesh and bone he had cut through since meeting Will, and the new fire with which he saw killing and destruction.

Hannibal set down his dessert plate and sat back on the couch with his coffee, his hand still pressed to Will’s nape with soothing, thoughtless motions.

He recalled the tale of Mnemosyne, the mother of the goddesses, who was named for the river of memory. When one drank from the river of memory, they no longer remembered the past lives from which they were reincarnated. There were too many consequences of the transmigration of the soul when one could not stop yearning for their past life.

He felt Will’s eyes on him—a fond, uncertain look that Hannibal did not know what to do with.

Will set down his own plate, and when he sat back, he rested his hand on Hannibal’s thigh. His fingers cupped the muscle a few inches above his knee, digging into his skin enough that there was no room to assume hesitance or uncertainty.

Hannibal wasn’t sure what to do. The advance was unsurprising, he had arguably even orchestrated it himself, but something was missing. He wanted them to come together in passion and truth, but here he was still yearning for another world instead.

Will was trying to catch his eye, and Hannibal finally returned it with a melancholy smile. Here was Will, being as patient and gentle with Hannibal as he could be, because he still felt like they were gentle friends.

Hannibal let his hand slip from Will’s neck. He couldn’t do this. He was going to break Will’s heart.

Will observed his hesitance, perceptive eyes travelling to each corner of his face. Realization came with a wince.

“It’s faded,” he said. Not a question.

“I’m not quite sure how I’m feeling, to be honest,” Hannibal said.

Will turned his gaze away. His face had been flushed pretty and pink for most of the evening but suddenly it turned red and embarrassed.

“And I’m confused again, to be honest with you," he said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

"I simply do not wish to make any rash decisions, not when our relationship is inherently quite ethically sensitive," Hannibal said, looking down at his lap solemnly.

Will hummed. He sounded doubtful. "I should probably head out."

Hannibal nodded. He would like to be alone again. As alone as he was in his mind that felt like his only home these days.

“I understand. I’ll walk you to the door.”

Will stopped to put his dishes in the kitchen which was unnecessarily but endearingly polite. Hannibal could see the moment Will considered offering to wash the dishes warring with the part of him that wanted to run away from the situation. In the end, his panic won out and he walked with purpose toward the front door and snatched his own coat from the closet like he couldn’t get out fast enough.

He reached for the doorknob as if he was going to leave without another word, but then he paused. Hannibal stood waiting in anticipation as Will turned his head back halfway with a deep frown.

“It’s because it’s too easy, isn’t it?” Will asked. His eyes were darker than before.

“Pardon?”

“You don't care about the ethics, and I don't appreciate you making it out like that's what this is about. No, you’ve seen me as a challenge. The hostile, anti-social guy with the interesting psyche… I could have made things more interesting, but then I wanted you back too fast. I didn’t even really fight it. I didn’t fight *you.*”

He blinked. “Will, I assure you, that isn’t what this is. Perhaps we should talk this through rather than leave each other stewing with uncertainties,” Hannibal said.

How could he even begin to explain? He gestured back to the hall, but Will did not budge.

“Middle-aged man, good career, stable life, yet no partner. You wanna know what I think? I think you consider yourself too good for everyone else.” Will shrugged and his shoulders quivered with a tremor he couldn’t hide. “You have good reason to. I can't even really blame you. You see people as entertainment; you’re not laughing with them but at them, I *see* it.”

“Not you,” Hannibal insisted. He took a hesitant step forward but Will shook his head in warning.

“I have enough people preferring the way I think over who I am, I don’t need it from you too.”

With that, Will yanked open the door and subsequently slammed it behind him. The sound echoed through the house and Hannibal stood frozen in place.

Chapter End Notes

promise i'll be a bit nicer to this Will next chapter 😬❤️

Choices

Hannibal would never have claimed to read people as well as Will could, with the quasi-mystical way he could step into one's mind and absorb their hopes and dreams, but he did have one thing going for him. Hannibal was adept at analyzing the world from a step back, in creating a vantage point from which he could pull the strings to his desires without becoming emotionally compromised in the dealings of irrelevant people.

He was unnerved to realize how complicated placating Will seemed to be when he was so thoroughly wrapped up in the consequences it would create for himself. Will had only just left, but he felt like he could barely breathe.

He wanted to chase after him. He wanted to remove himself from the situation entirely. He wanted to talk to the Will in his mind instead. He could not live with the betrayal of it.

Hannibal could not stand to abandon the Will in this world, not while leaving his heart intact.

He needed to come to an agreement within himself. It may be inevitable that he sacrificed some of the things he wanted so dearly—for the Will in his mind to become real and physical, and the Will in this place to know him and their history intimately—and he may need to learn to live with such contradictions for the ache of his love to be sated.

He was organizing the space around his landline incessantly, straightening the phone against the line of the counter with an unnecessary eye of precision, when it rang its shrill noise. Will's name lit up on the monitor and he snatched it up into his grasp, waiting an appropriate additional ring to answer.

"Will?"

"Hannibal, hi," Will said, voice raised so he could be heard over thrumming white noise in the background.

"Is that traffic I hear? Are you not at home yet?"

"I pulled over on the I-95."

"May I ask why?"

"Want to know if my car is still upright or if I've flipped over a few times?"

"Now that you've said it, I'd like to confirm your safety."

"I was joking, I'm fine, I… just needed a minute. I couldn't leave it at that. I didn't even let you try to explain."

"I understand why you were upset. Rejection is a painful thing."

“Yeah, and I felt like I really needed…” Will trailed off. “Listen, I want to know what’s really going on, and I’m here to listen to whatever you have to say. Something’s been off ever since that morning in your kitchen.”

Will had noticed then. Of course he had, with his pin-sharp, unavoidable mind.

He was quiet for a moment, and Will added, “Please don’t do me the disservice of denying it. My capacity for forgiveness isn’t what it would have been yesterday.”

Hannibal started pacing, breathing heavily more out of anticipation than exertion.

“You are right, of course,” he admitted, then snapped his mouth shut again.

Will was silent for a moment. “We can stay on the phone for however long you want until you’re ready to talk.” In his voice was a demand. Hannibal needed to give an answer this time.

Perhaps Hannibal didn’t need to admit every impossibility that had occurred. He couldn’t, not without exposing who he was too early.

As it often was in his life, being vague would be the safest option. He could give Will a hint of the truth and prepare them both for breaking down their walls into full knowledge of the other without outright lying to Will. Perhaps a show of vulnerability would work to his advantage.

“I…” he paused for effect. “I have been uncertain in my reality as of late.”

He could almost feel the way Will softened on the other line. “Well I can sure understand that.”

Hannibal gulped, considering the line he was willing to toe of the truth.

“—As if there is another reality I should be living in. It’s not an ideal world, more of a nightmare than not, but I feel as if I cannot let it go because I wish to make it better. To tend to it like the garden of my own home.”

“I see…. What’s this world like?”

“Much like our own. You’ll forgive me if I don’t want to discuss it in depth. I… I—”

Hannibal floundered until Will took pity on him and spoke. “It’s vulnerable to admit our weaknesses, and becoming uncertain in reality is a staggering lack of control. That’s why you took those mushrooms. You were trying to forcibly regain that control by putting yourself in a situation where you lost it.”

“Yes,” Hannibal whispered. Despite how carefully he was choosing his words, he felt vulnerable in the face of Will’s understanding and attention.

“Will, I do have a therapist of my own, I don’t need you to step in for me,” he added.

Will scoffed on the other line, a suddenly obnoxious and exasperated noise. “I’m here for you as your friend, Hannibal. I expect you don’t have many of those. Not true friends.”

It was true. In addition to his short-lived affairs, he’d always needed to keep his colleagues and acquaintances at a certain distance. Will was the first person he could recall ever wanting as a true friend. He missed him already.

“This night ended on an unfortunate note. Allow me to come over and rectify it,” Hannibal said.

Will let out a small noise of surprise. After a moment’s pause he just said, “Okay.”

“I will be right behind you.”

When Hannibal arrived at Will’s little farmhouse after a long drive through the dark, his chest ached.

The property was so alive before things had grown too overwhelming for Will. There was still good upkeep of his gardens and property, all lit up by a row of porch lights. The space where he remembered dying was a field of grass browning in the autumn cold. Inside there was the incidental clutter that suggested a fond and abundant use of his space—books and tools and creased armchairs and water cups without dust rings. Will was in the process of tidying it all up when Hannibal let himself inside, and he paused with some dog toys in his arms to smile warmly at Hannibal. He was dressed down into just his flannel now, unbuttoned to reveal a triangle of his chest.

Will let the toys fall out of his arms and into a bin tucked away in the corner, but a couple of dogs were already close behind to take the toys back at the excitement of a visitor. The others were already swarming Hannibal’s legs, smelling his pockets for treats.

“Something to drink?” Will asked.

Hannibal considered whether his answer might imply he intended to stay over, then realized he truly did not want to leave this familiar home now that he had arrived.

“I would be particular to whiskey right now if that suits you.”

Will looked grateful for the suggestion of hard liquor. It seemed Will in every world was quick to rely on spirits.

There was a quiet to the night that felt exaggerated in Will’s isolated property. Hannibal moved carefully over the creaking floorboards so as to keep the peace, and tucked himself into one of the armchairs. It was the same one he often sat in in his memory palace.

Will brought him a glass of whiskey and pulled another chair closer by its base between his legs. He sat back and took a long gulp of his own drink, sighing deeply.

“So in this other world…” Will started. “Am I there?”

Hannibal smiled. “How could I leave out my one true friend?”

“What am I like in your mind?”

“I think I have a decent enough grasp on you that any differences aren’t readily apparent, and incongruences are quickly explained away by my mind as it tries to convince me that what I am seeing is real.”

That could be close to the truth, if his memory palace was in fact all an illusion. It was unsettling to think he could have deceived himself so thoroughly.

It wasn’t quite true that he had a good grasp on Will though, was it? Will had reduced Hannibal to gullibility during his great deception. He never quite knew how to predict or even understand the man at times.

“I guess you said it wasn’t an ideal reality like most people would opt for in fantasy. Not that you have control over it,” Will said.

Will’s words reminded Hannibal of a conversation he tried to have ages ago. He had expressed himself as well as he could, but it had changed nothing at the time.

“Do you know what an *imago* is, Will?” Hannibal asked, looking into his glass.

“A flying insect,” Will responded, just as Hannibal had predicted and wanted to hear. It was a necessary reminder that some things never changed, and one was Will’s subtle but sustaining interest in insects.

Hannibal smiled fondly at him. “In the last stage of its transformation, yes.” A transformation that Will was nowhere close to in this world, not yet. “But what I am talking about is a term from the dead religion of psychoanalysis. An *imago* is an image of a loved one, buried in the unconscious, carried with us for all our lives. An ideal, at least the concept of one.”

He did not feel the same impatience that he usually did for rehashing old conversations, not when this topic was one that he was still ruminating on so often. Perhaps it would help to recontextualize it in this world.

“I think I want to know how you see me in your mind because I want to know what that ideal is, and whether I fit into it,” Will responded. “Sometimes I get the sense that you expect more from me, when I lose your attention and you seem to be somewhere else—a challenge, an equal, whatever it may be. Like maybe if I was different, I would be enough. Does that ideal exist in your mind?”

He admired Will in front of him, following Hannibal’s line of thought so seamlessly and asking the difficult question because he craved truth more than anything.

He wanted him so badly.

Hannibal thought on the question for another moment and then said in a steady tone that left no room for uncertainties, “No. He is not an ideal, and neither are you, as no one could ever be. But you are enough nonetheless. I apologize for doubting it—it was my own uncertainties getting the best of me. What you observed that day in my office, it is the truth of my feelings, and much more.”

He had already accepted that love was a restructuring of one’s life around another person and he could do that for Will in both worlds.

Will's expression softened. Hope lined his face. He really was attached to Hannibal here, and that was a union that held vast potential for influencing him how Hannibal wanted.

Will didn’t say a word. He stood up and Hannibal watched him curiously. He felt frozen in place as Will crossed the few feet between their chairs and put a steadying hand on the back of Hannibal’s. He lowered himself on the chair one leg at a time, fitting his knees at each side of Hannibal’s hips and closing the space between them.

Hannibal was struck. Will continued to surprise him, shucking his visible nerves like outerwear and cupping Hannibal’s face with purpose. Will led Hannibal’s face how he wanted him and connected their lips.

The silence of the property was suddenly echoing out from him, as if nothing existed beyond their rustling. Their noses slotted against each other’s faces as Will pressed forward, pinning Hannibal to the chair.

When Will let up for a moment, Hannibal chased his lips and kissed him again. A fire was sparking inside of him, tendrils of flames twisting up his guts, filling his chest, and opening his throat. He must have become sentimental somewhere along the way because the mere thought of experiencing this side of Will, tasting his mouth and seeing his pleasure, was filling him with an incredible euphoria. He wanted to covet this part of Will and learn every shade, all of his desires and reactions.

Will was hunched over him in the chair to be able to kiss him back, but Hannibal couldn’t help but pull him forward anyway, breaking apart their lips with a pop and lifting Will up on his knees to hug his torso close. How many times had he craved to hold Will this close, even when he tried to deny the urge again and again? He became surrounded by Will’s body odour, his deodorant and aftershave faded, leaving a natural musk that was far more appealing. He inhaled deep and indulgently, mouthing along the outside of his shirt.

“This was something of a test,” Will said breathlessly from above him. He looked toward the ceiling as if in prayer, baring his throat for Hannibal.

“What for?”

“That you really do like me for more than my intriguing mind,” Will snarked, a smirk stretching his mouth wider.

Hannibal slipped his hands up Will's shirt and scratched harshly down his back. Dead skin collected under his fingernails and his nails caught on moles and other blemishes, but he kept marking down his skin anyway. Will sank into him, clearly enjoying the feeling.

"I assure you, Will," he said, brushing over his nipple with his upper lip and only just resisting the urge to wet it through his shirt, "I would devour you if I could, including that mind of yours. That urge is entirely carnal."

A satisfied noise came out of Will's throat before he spoke. "I doubt it would be the least ethical thing you've done."

It nearly brought Hannibal pause. Fascinating. Perhaps Will had caught onto more than he showed. Not that he'd have guessed Hannibal's appetite thus far, but maybe he had an idea about Hannibal's more *lenient* morals.

Will hooked his fingers under Hannibal's jaw, digging his nails into the flesh of his throat to hold him still as he lowered back down and pressed another wet kiss to his mouth. Will was so beautiful and vivid close up, each pore and trimmed hair a sight to behold.

"Stay with me?" Will asked.

There was implication in Will's question, just as there had been in their choice of drink, and just how there was now in their clinging grips on each other.

It was hard not to feel like it was a betrayal. The Will he had been through so much with was not so far away, likely sitting in their memory palace now, perhaps in this very chair in the corner of his cluttered house, drinking through more bottles of beer than he should. He loved that Will first and he should show him his love first. If there was one thing he could do for him still, it was to wait for him.

"I wish to stay, but I won't have sex with you. Not tonight."

Will slumped further into him, disappointment pulling his shoulders down. He buried his face in Hannibal's neck and then kissed him there insistently, not hiding his intention to change Hannibal's mind. He was more desperate than Hannibal expected, and that knowledge was beyond tantalizing.

Will mouthed up his jaw and connected their lips again, kissing him harder. It was so tempting to just take from the warm, willing body before him. He'd watched and fantasized about Will from afar countless times, only ever increasing his desire to strip and touch the man. He felt something akin to disbelief that he had him so close now, but there was the unsettling sense that he wasn't quite the same person he loved. He hadn't been able to kiss Will for the first time with the enormity of their context behind that. That experience had been stolen from him for the sake of fitting into this world.

He already had a physical relationship with Will in his mind palace; he had penetrated his flesh and felt his blood spill over his hand and that felt just as, if not more, intimate than sex. He needed to touch him first, trace his scars that this Will didn't have, and consummate what they started.

Will's lip curled against his and he knocked their foreheads together. "Stop thinking so much. I can feel your resistance, and it isn't needed here. Trust me."

Hannibal planted his feet on the floor and grabbed the back of Will's thighs to balance him as he stood up, carrying both of their weights until Will's feet could hit the floor. It was very difficult to release his soft flesh, especially when Will clung so tightly around his neck. Hannibal was already hot and tenting in his pants and he needed to control himself.

"I know you're tired. Let's go get ready for bed," Hannibal said. And it was true, dark circles had ringed Will's eyes all day.

Will looped his arm around Hannibal's neck, locking him in with his elbow as he kissed him again. Their bodies aligned and Will was hard against him. Clearly, attraction wouldn't be an issue for him either, inexperience with men or not. The knowledge of that made him rethink everything they'd ever been. Had it always been right under his nose?

Hannibal pulled back when Will let him. "Will, please," he whispered. If Will didn't show him mercy, something was going to happen.

Will tugged hard on his hair like it was punishment, but finally broke away, though he didn't look happy about it.

"Do you want something to wear to bed?" Will asked, his voice flat with acquiescence. He turned away, smoothing his rumpled shirt.

"Please."

Will found him pyjama pants and a large shirt, then gave him a spare toothbrush and a small hand towel to get ready for bed. Hannibal closed the bathroom door behind him, grateful for a moment to breathe.

Hannibal usually had impressive control over his body and his desires, but the indulgence that thinking about Will gave made it hard not to want to anyway. He eventually managed to leave the bathroom without a tent in his pants.

Will was changing the sheets. What he didn't know was that Hannibal would gladly sleep within his unwashed musk if he had the choice.

Crawling into Will's bed still felt significant. His mattress wasn't as good of quality as he was used to, sagging and lumpy with use, but he wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Countless nightmares had occurred in this space, practically haunting the air around it. He wanted to pluck them each out of the air and admire their shapes.

When Will was ready for bed, he crawled in on Hannibal's left side, laying flat and staring at the ceiling. His eyes were shining with a faraway glassiness.

"You once told me your mind didn't leave you much room for amorous thoughts," Hannibal said.

“What I left out is that it’s occasionally the best distraction from my mind instead. It’s hard not to crave those… nicer hormones these days,” Will muttered. Hannibal could understand that feeling well. This close, Hannibal could hear the soft rumbling of Will’s throat as he spoke in all its sensual glory.

Hannibal gave into a curiosity. “I’ll be honest, before this I assumed you had your sights set on Alana Bloom.”

Will smiled. Perhaps that crush hadn’t been completely stamped by Hannibal’s presence.

“Alana Bloom is quite the woman, it’s hard not to set my sights on her when the opportunity arises.” His smile faded slightly. “But it wouldn’t be good for either of us. I’m not sure she entirely understands what’s ever going on with me.”

“She would forever be caught by her professional desire to study you,” Hannibal confirmed insistently.

“I know.” Will raised his eyebrows. “Worried about something, Doctor Lecter? I’d be happy to show my regard for you if you’d only let me.”

He shook his head bashfully. He didn’t mean to express such possessiveness.

“Not so long ago you were renouncing any attraction for me,” he said.

“And before that I said I didn’t find you interesting, right? Things change.” Will's throat bobbed with a gulp. “Somewhere along the way, I changed. I can’t say I expected it either. Suddenly, I just couldn’t get you out of my head.”

Hannibal hummed in pleasure. “Humans would hardly be interesting if we were so static.”

“Desires come and go. Sometimes they put up a fight before leaving.”

“Patience, Will, we have all the time in the world.” *And more worlds,* he thought.

Will looked doubtful, but Hannibal reached an arm over his pillow and played with his hair. Will settled down quickly with the affection, his eyes fluttering closed and his breathing levelling out until he was finally unconscious.

Restraint

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was crying in his sleep.

It was close to 2am when the noises started, but he'd been a restless sleeper the entirety of the night beforehand. Hannibal would know. He had not slept.

Will twitched incessantly, breathed irregularly, and twisted from side to side only to end up on his back again. He sweat profusely, likely a mix of the agitation, anxiety, and inflammation. He was radiating heat across the bed with his mild fever.

The cries escaped his throat like he was choking on them in his sleep. In the pale light of the moon, Hannibal could see the glistening wetness on his cheeks. He observed the way his breathing picked up and the rapid twitching of his eyelids.

Fear. Will was terrified of something.

Hannibal considered whether he should wake him, but decided to watch him a little longer. Vulnerability stuck to Will like a layer of frail skin. He conquered it day by day with his strength and determination, but that was absent right now. All that was left was the fear he collected and stored within himself, intruding on his body without the necessary forts he used in daily life. He'd been enamoured watching him sleep, his mind wandering places he'd rather not admit. The ache had hardly left him for the last few hours.

Will's breathing quickened and he shook his head back and forth in jerky motions, as if trying to escape from invisible bounds.

At an incitement that Hannibal could not detect, Will gasped and his eyes flew open.

Hannibal pretended to only just awaken with him, sitting up halfway and blinking blearily.

"Will? Will. Look at me," he murmured soothingly. "It was a bad dream. You're here with me,"

Hannibal reached for his arm, but Will flinched away, leaning his body nearly over the other edge of the bed.

"Shit, sorry," he rasped, wiping his cheeks and bending into his hands for a moment. He wiped at his face and then stared at his hands like he couldn't believe how wet he was.

Will swung his legs over the side and left the bed. This wasn't what Hannibal wanted at all.

"Where are you going?"

“Just go back to sleep, Hannibal. It’s fine,” he said, his voice muffled from the distance. He disappeared inside the bathroom and emerged with a towel without turning on the light.

“Will.” He could just make out Will shaking his head across the room as he propped up a throw pillow to the top of one of the rocking armchairs. The dogs sniffed his legs curiously as he walked by.

Hannibal raised his voice. “Trust me that I will be blunt enough to tell you to leave if I want you to leave. Come back to bed.”

Will paused. He stood still for a long moment before cautiously walking back to the bed, wiping the back of his neck with the towel he grabbed.

“This has gotta be off-putting,” he said.

“There is nothing off-putting about the physiological processes we can’t control. The insomnia that nightmares can inspire is an unfortunate positive feedback loop of poor mental health and the least I can do is be here for you and try to help you sleep better.”

He reached out for Will again, who shrunk back at the sight. It was like trying to coax a skittish animal closer.

“What did you see in your dreams?” Hannibal asked.

Will shook his head. “We don’t need to talk about it.”

“It may help.”

Will’s ensuing silence spoke enough of his stubbornness.

“Then just come here,” Hannibal said.

“I should shower.”

“I don’t mind if you do not. This world is so obsessed with covering up their natural odours but I would still choose it over your unfortunate aftershave.”

Will raised one eyebrow. “You don’t like my aftershave?”

Of course, they’d never had that conversation in this world. He’d forgotten where he was.

“It smells like something with a ship on the bottle,” Hannibal explained.

Will snorted. “I keep getting it for Christmas.”

Will seemed to relax slightly at the teasing and crawled back into bed, flattening the towel out over the wet spot he left. He laid down stiffly and Hannibal reached a cautious hand across his body, wary of scaring him off. He pressed his hand to his forehead, pushing the sticking hairs out of the way gently. He moved down to cup his cheek next and beard hairs tickled his palm. Endearingly, Will leaned into his touch.

Will was damp and radiating heat, emitting that feverishly sweet smell that Hannibal had admittedly missed when Will underwent treatment. There was something captivating about the scent, drawing Hannibal in. He never craved anyone so raw, but perhaps Will was the exception in this too.

He gave into an urge, recalling the boundaries they'd broken through that very night with some surreality, and kissed Will's temple. He kissed lower, just in front of his ear, parting his lips to taste the sweat dotting his skin. It was entirely preferable and incredibly enticing that Will was next to him like this.

"Come closer, it's dry over here," Hannibal said. It was too difficult to keep the seductive rasp out of his voice entirely. He was entering dangerous territory and he knew it.

Will scooted closer, chasing Hannibal's lips whether he knew it or not until they were face to face and only inches apart. Hannibal only just resisted the temptation and pulled Will down to rest above his shoulder instead. He wrapped his arms around Will and traced the bump of his spine up his back until he reached the hair at the base of his skull. Will shivered hard against him, racking his body with the sensation.

"Why won't you?" Will asked.

Hannibal froze. "Hm?"

"Don't pretend you don't know. You don't feign stupidity very well."

Will shifted his hips closer to Hannibal's thigh. He pressed his mouth to Hannibal's ear.

"I could really use the distraction right now."

"Will," he warned. His voice even sounded weak to him.

"Hannibal," he mimicked, bucking forward to punctuate his request.

Hannibal breathed in deeply, feeling a shudder run up his spine.

"Please," he insisted, hissing into his ear.

Hannibal had the sense that his resolve had already crumbled long ago. There was no way he could deny Will speaking to him like that while he lined his feverish-hot body up against Hannibal. Sex was made significant because of context, and chastity was foolish.

Hannibal rolled on top of him and pressed Will into the bed as he opened Will's mouth with his own lips, kissing with the fervour pent up from the long night of wanting this. Hannibal's clothes and skin dampened from the sweat glazed over Will's body, and he sighed in satisfaction knowing he would smell just like him. It felt good to let go and disregard the consequences. With a surprised moan, Will pulled him down with his hands twisted into his hair, spreading his legs to make room for Hannibal.

The urge to bite Will until he bled was nearly irresistible now that he'd given in to his urges. He nipped hard enough to make him gasp, over and over again, trailing down his throat and

probably leaving little irregular bruises.

He wanted to feel Will where he was truly hot and hard. He slipped a hand under the waistband of Will's pyjama pants and got a hand around his length. Will was silky smooth and emanating heat here just like the rest of him. He watched his face as he began to stroke him, nose to nose so he could feel every panted breath and see every flash of his eyes as Hannibal gathered up precome and twisted his hand from bottom to top. Will arched toward him at the stimulation, keeping a hand at the back of his head, fingers spread in a strong grip as if scared that Hannibal would stop and pull away. He had every intention to stay and make Will come, but he slowed his hand when Will's hips began to pick up the pace just to see him buck.

They rocked against each other insistently, driven by desperation rather than rhythm, while Hannibal indulged in memorizing each movement of his lips. Will kissed him firmly, sucking Hannibal's lips as he pressed closer then opening his mouth when Hannibal did to meet teeth with teeth. Their stubble rubbed together with a pleasing scratching sound and he purposefully pressed them close enough to hear it, not bothered that he'd be left with red rash marks after.

When Will was panting like he was close again, Hannibal let go and reached his hand lower, rubbing at his tight balls as Will ground fruitlessly at his wrist. He deprived him until Will seemed to recede from that dangerous edge.

Will gripped his shoulders tightly. "Don't tease me now. Didn't I beg enough?" He hooked one arm behind his neck like a chokehold, arching up into Hannibal with his body.

Hannibal didn't want it to end. He wouldn't ever be able to get enough of Will, but he at least wanted all night.

This was supposed to be a simple release, though. Something to hold them over before he could make good on his promise to the Will he fell in love with. He couldn't turn the man below him into a replacement. It was too easy. It felt unfaithful.

Hannibal backed up, pulling down Will's pyjama pants to the middle of his thigh, and then took Will's cock in his mouth.

"*Oh.*"

It would be better not to see his face in the throws of pleasure. He could pretend Will was just anyone else.

Hannibal found his own pleasures down at Will's hips. The sharp taste of him, the hot smell where his thighs met his groin, the smooth feel of him against his lips and tongue. He shoved his hands under Will's ass and indulged in his soft weight as he rubbed himself on the bed, imagining himself grinding up against the man below him instead. He guided Will in and out of his mouth where he worked to get Will off, albeit not as fast as he could have if he was really trying to speed things up.

Will's hands returned to his hair and held him down enough to choke him. Hannibal indulged Will, confident enough in his lack of gag reflex, and pressed the head of his cock into the tight spot at the back of his throat, swallowing like he'd hardly done for anyone in years. The feeling was uncomfortable, but with Will he was enraptured.

Will jerked against him, clenching his ass and gasping above him. He came in long shaking spurts, flooding Hannibal's mouth with the bodily fluid that he would heartily accept in place of drawn blood.

He kept Will in his mouth, gently suckling at his wavering length until it was clean and Will was nudging him to stop.

Hannibal lifted his head and wiped the drool from his bottom lip. Will was tilting his head to peer down at Hannibal between his legs. Hannibal followed the line of hair trailing up to the bottom of his sleep shirt, the fabric clinging to his sweat-damp chest, then his unruly hair, and Hannibal couldn't believe how attracted he was to him. He couldn't believe that it was once a non-question, or ever a question after that. His entire body ached for him, and that ache was hurting now.

Hannibal climbed back up his body and indulged himself in kissing Will, getting a hand inside his own borrowed pants. Will quickly fought him, reaching for Hannibal's waistband insistently to do it himself, and rolled them over. Hannibal allowed him to pull out his cock and get a dry grip around him. He was quick to build up a slick glide with how much Hannibal was leaking.

Hannibal pulled himself up until it was less of an awkward angle and watched Will gawk at him through bleary eyes.

"I can…" Will started.

Holding back a moan, Hannibal forced himself to shake his head. "I'm close."

Forever the proponent of fairness, Will offering to pay back the favour of oral sex. But Hannibal would keep this encounter as simple as it could be, barring the few indulgences he'd taken.

Will slowed his grip and gently pulled back his foreskin, thumbing underneath to the sensitive head in a way that made Hannibal twitch. Will was circumcised; Hannibal was not. His apparent curiosity was another hint that Hannibal may be the first man Will was sleeping with, though he acknowledged that many men in the United States were cut.

The possessiveness grabbed at him and he buried his face in Will's neck to hold back the intensity of it all. In this world, no one else would have him but Hannibal.

"Yeah, that's good, come on," Will whispered in his ear. It was rare to hear praise from Will and somewhat surprising that he was talking in bed at all. The details sent pleasurable shockwaves to his gut. He liked to talk during sex too, but he was too wary of what would come out if he did so now. He sucked at Will's neck, his teeth grazing threateningly over his skin without biting down. He thrust into Will's hand and focused on trying to finish.

“Just bite me if that’s what you want,” Will said.

Hannibal nearly startled at the invisible perceptiveness that only Will could have, and then did what he was told.

He clenched his teeth just hard enough to avoid breaking the skin. He was certain it hurt, but Will gave no sign of being in pain, jerking Hannibal through his orgasm and staining his already wet shirt with ejaculate.

Hannibal ground forward until he was spent and tired. He lingered for another moment and kissed the divots in Will’s skin before he settled down, tingling with the afterglow. Will stayed close, trailing an affectionate hand up Hannibal’s chest.

He leaned over Hannibal to grab some tissues from the side table and kissed his ear as he pulled back to wipe himself down. A sweet and domestic afterglow like any sexual partner he could have had, except this was Will, and Hannibal felt particularly bare, even without losing any of his clothes. Will gave him a sweet, satisfied smile reminiscent of shared pleasures. It was a warm, validating feeling.

And he couldn’t ignore the guilt he felt for it. He would need to unpack those complicated feelings. He'd opened a door that could not easily be locked again.

“Try to sleep again, I’m here,” he insisted. He felt emotionally spent but physically satisfied. “Turn over,” he guided.

Will turned and backed up into him so Hannibal could hold him from behind. Will could do with some more affectionate touch these days. Hannibal squeezed him tight, hooking his arms together to keep Will locked close, and hoped it was a comfort.

Chapter End Notes

well at least hannibal held out for one evening...

Instability

He and Will parted early in the morning to get to work, sharing a quiet coffee on the porch while the dogs spent their time playing on the lawn. He held back from asking Will about his nightmare; all in due time. Will kissed him on the side of his mouth and saw Hannibal off with a sleepy, grateful smile.

Will had slept still and undisturbed for a few hours straight after their little nighttime frisk and looked more rested than he had in a while. Bruises lined his throat.

Hannibal went about his day as normal, but there was only one thing on his mind. He felt all too aware that the longer he put it off, the worse it would seem, but he couldn't seem to make himself step into his memory palace. He put off the inevitable with appointments and paperwork until he had no excuses left.

He knew he should be just as gentle with the Will in his mind as he was with the one he slept next to last night, but he also wanted to tell him the truth. He wanted to know how far Will's feelings for him reached after the betrayals and heartbreak. He wanted to know if it would hurt him the way the reversal would hurt Hannibal.

At the same time, he wanted to hide it all. He wanted the pleasures of this world to be kept separate and allowed to stay pure, just as he wanted to covet what he had in his memory palace.

He feared that once he faced Will, it would be impossible to hide what he had done.

He sat back in his office chair and sank deep into his mind. At first, he only sensed emptiness in the rooms they inhabited and he worried Will had given up on him for good, but then he sensed a kind of movement from far off, like a ripple in a pond. He concentrated on the energy and felt himself drawn in to somewhere else completely.

He found Will's presence on none other than a boat in the middle of the ocean. Another room that Hannibal had never been privy to. One he must have been building while he was gone.

His face was being pelted with cold, salty spray scattered by the wind. He could barely hear himself think behind the roaring of the waves. The sky arched above him for miles in a blinding streak of solid white from the sun beating beyond their cloudy day. When he leaned over the side, he found the name written on the side, *Nola.*

There was no sign of Will, so he ducked into the small entrance down into the base of the boat and was relieved to find a comparably quiet respite from the elements, though the boat still rocked him unsteadily.

Will was sitting on a narrow bench between a compressed kitchen decorated in dark oak cabinets and yellowed ceramic tile reminiscent of 1980s American interior design. He looked unbothered by the weather outside. Hannibal imagined he was used to the pull and sway of a

small boat on the waters, and had learned to adapt with it how he often did in life, leaning to one side and then the other to offset the pressure.

“Where are we about now?” Hannibal asked.

“I’d say right in the middle of the pacific ocean,” he replied flatly.

“I see. Is this the new stream you take to, above the water rather than ankle-deep?”

“I find it relaxing in its own way. The white noise of the waves. The peace far away from most people. The sensation of going somewhere, doing something.”

“I can see the appeal.”

“There’s a lot of places I can go in here but I still can’t find you when you disappear for a day,” Will said, and Hannibal caught on to the reason for his moodiness.

“I apologize for not coming to you sooner. I became rather busy all of a sudden.”

“Being busy didn’t stop you from multitasking and spending the better part of last week with me anyway. Clearly something was taking your attention.”

“There’s very little that could take my attention away from you.”

“Then what did?”

Hannibal paused. He had a feeling that this conversation was going to happen whether he wanted it or not.

“You.”

Will watched him warily.

It didn’t seem like Will wanted Hannibal to be gentle with him. It seemed like he wanted the truth, as scared as he was of it.

“Just tell me where exactly you are when you’re not here,” Will hissed.

Hannibal composed himself as best as he could. He was almost certain Will already knew and just wanted to hear him say it. He couldn't think of anything to do but give him the truth.

“After Jack shot me, I woke up. I was standing in a place familiar to me not so long again. And then in you came—ratty plaid shirt, on the offset of a sleepwalking spell, burning up with your inflamed brain.”

Will grimaced, turning away like he could pretend the conversation wasn’t happening.

“That’s—no. How could it be? Maybe you *are* the crazy one.”

“Maybe,” Hannibal conceded, putting his hands up. It caught them at a standstill. They couldn’t prove that everything was merely their imagination any more than they could prove

that it was entirely real. Hannibal imagined Will coming to the same conclusion as he was: whether or not these things were literally happening, they were significant because they felt as though they were. This space was all they had together, and Will was hurt that Hannibal had more.

“Is it different in any way from before?” Will asked.

“Had I acted the same as I did the first time around, I truly believe that the world would be a perfect carbon copy of before.”

“But you would never just sit back and miss an opportunity to stir things up,” Will said, eyebrows furrowed and creasing his forehead. “What are you doing to me?”

“Do you feel protective of your other self?”

“I don’t know how I feel. I don’t know how I *should* feel, would you!?”

The boat rocked particularly violently to one side and Hannibal put out a hand to steady himself. The wind picked up, whistling through cracks in the siding, and he wondered if a storm was brewing.

“It is an admittedly unique situation,” Hannibal said over the noise. “It calls the self into question. Is he your brother? Your foe? You have diverged at a crucial point, and from here you may become strangers, no matter that the blueprint was once the same.”

“What are you doing to him?” Will repeated, more insistently.

Hannibal stayed quiet for a moment, his throat catching on a gulp. What *was* he doing to Will? Loving him? Testing him?

“I am trying to do things better than before,” he finally said.

Will avoided his gaze, seemingly deep in thought. Or perhaps caught in his misery. He stared into middle distance as a smile spread across his face, one that was almost maniacal.

Will laughed, shaking his head. His voice was icy when he spoke.

“So you can fuck off and have your fun all over again, while I sit here in limbo because you’ve already ruined my life beyond compare and can’t even finish what you started?”

Hannibal squared his shoulders toward Will. “Look at me and tell me that you really believe that is how I have ever approached you.”

Will threw his hands up. “Fine. Lucky me that you still want me around to influence from the other *dimension* you’re living in. You get it all, like you always fucking do, the fucking hedonist that you are.”

“I am dealing with the loss of you just as you are with me. Can you imagine being placed with me before you changed me into what I am? We both know our evolutions are tied to each other and that we are entirely alone otherwise.”

“If I was placed back with you at the start I’d give you a reckoning so fast and save a lot of people I wanted to keep around instead,” Will hissed.

Hannibal straightened his back, looked down at Will, and said, “I'd hoped we were past lying to each other by now.” He couldn't seem to keep the bitterness out of his tone.

Will pounced to his feet, grabbed a knife from a block in the kitchen that Hannibal wasn't sure was there before, and rushed at Hannibal.

Will threw Hannibal back against the wall, shaking the boat enough to knock things off the counters behind them. The sky outside darkened with roiling clouds closing in.

The pain was a distant thing, something he recognized as their slippery, inaccurate imaginations rather than anything real or visceral. It was a heartbreaking revelation, to look down and see the knife plunged up to its hilt in his gut and know it meant nothing.

Will pulled the knife out and plunged it back in a few inches to the left as if desperate to make it mean something. He could imagine it if it was real, how mangled his large intestine would be, the slick puncture wound through his kidney. The franticness with which he would need to patch himself up, because Will didn’t know where to stab him and not make it end too soon.

“Will,” he said.

Will looked up at his face, and then in a jerking motion, stabbed the knife upward into his jugular and through to the back of his throat. Hannibal gasped in surprise, then subsequently choked on the spurting blood in the back of his throat. Will, *his* Will, was so wonderfully brutal when he let himself be.

His blood poured out in droves, splashing the tops of their feet and making a puddle on the floor.

“Did it feel good?” Hannibal asked, hoarse through the imagined pressure in his throat.

Will jerked his hand, pressing the knife impossibly further into his neck. His face screwed up in misery, only inches away from Hannibal and searching for something in his eyes—perhaps the certainty of pain and death that wouldn’t come because they could not really touch each other.

Hannibal cupped Will’s cheek, stroking affectionately down his ear and the stubble below. This at least was real enough, because he’d been able to memorize it before.

“Just tell me what’s different there,” Will whispered. His eyes were wide and blue as the storm outside pouring down on them. He didn’t want to know, not really.

“Will.”

“Tell me.”

Hannibal memorized his hopeful, wondering look for another moment.

“Last night, you kissed me.”

Will jerked away from him, yanking the knife out of his neck as he created a few feet of distance between them.

“What? You—” He sputtered for a moment. "Are you manipulating me to....”

“Manipulate? I would not stoop so low, and you know it.”

“I wouldn’t. Not—” Will stared at a place through Hannibal.

“Even if I had been gentler and already expressed my interest in you?” Hannibal asked, stepping closer.

Will looked hurt, deeply so. This was not what Hannibal wanted. The rain poured down loudly against the deck outside and then started pouring down the steps because he hadn’t closed the door.

“Did you sleep with him?” Will asked quietly.

Hannibal’s throat caught at his mistake. He could not lie to himself that their intimacy wasn’t significant enough. It was.

He struggled to find any words that would make things better, not without betraying his promise to tell the truth. “Will," he repeated desperately.

Will flinched. For someone as perceptive as Will, it must have been the same as hearing the truth.

“We weren’t ever like that,” Will insisted.

“Did our intimacy not hold promise?”

“No,” Will said, pointing a finger at Hannibal and backing up as far as he could in the cramped space. “I kept *no* promises like that to you, none at all.”

Hannibal tilted his head. “Had I been locked away for you as I intended, and had you come back for me when you were ready, can you really tell me there was nothing—”

“Stop!” Will said firmly. “I can’t do this. I just need to get out of my fucking head. I need to get out of *yours*.”

“Will, please.”

The scene around him dissolved with one final crack of lightning until it was an imperfect abstraction of the boat that Hannibal hadn’t constructed in his mind well enough to know. Nothing was quite right, it was missing depth in his lack of knowledge, and most importantly, it was missing Will entirely.

Hannibal blinked into reality, devoid of blood and injury but with wetness lining his burning eyes.

Silence

[6:55 pm] Will Graham: I'd ask you to dinner but I think we both know I'm better off at the second counter and you are too careful about what you put in your body, so I'll just let you know I'm tentatively free this weekend and would like to see you, barring any inconvenient murders.

[9:57 pm] Will Graham: The old man may have had something to do with the other corpses. I am certain the Ripper is no vigilante, but maybe the FBI should hire him anyway.

[11:13 pm] Will Graham: The Ripper might put me out of a job. If I'm an empath, he must be an omnipotent God. How did he know?

[12:30 am] Will Graham: Goodnight.

[9:16 am] Will Graham: Some cops say you should wait 24 hours for a missing person's report, others 48 hours. The limit is negligible for vulnerable persons. I'll be lenient and not assume anything about your silence for a while longer.

Hannibal read through the messages with a lethargy that made it feel too difficult to hold his phone.

For the first time in a long while, there was true, echoing, continuous emptiness through his memory palace. It was the fear he had when he turned up here and expected to have lost Will forever, come true. Now he was wondering if that Will ever existed at all.

He would follow Will across the globe and further, but he couldn't find Will through worlds he had no access to anymore. He was at a loss.

He knew the best thing to do was to go on with his life and trust that Will couldn't stay away forever. It was not unlike his initial plan to turn himself in and wait for Will from behind a prison cell. That made this whole new world a prison cell, and it felt not entirely inaccurate.

Distraction was what he needed, he decided. Something to give him a new frame of mind. He forced himself out the door.

It just so happened that Georgia Madchen was next on the list.

She was a young woman who had connected to Will through their struggle to find control in their unstable minds. Madchen was likely already struggling with her mental illness, but not as extreme as she soon would be. He wondered if Will would resent that Hannibal took away her second chance of life, or if he would consider it an act of mercy. Would he feel like he did when he lost his attachment to Abigail, with the great innocence of their youth beckoning to him?

It was not difficult to find the young girl's social media, then the school she was still attending, and subsequently the extracurricular band practice she attended.

He grabbed her there, just as the sky was darkening into a silence that was far more pleasant than the amateur instruments that Hannibal listened to through the wall.

He was a proprietor of pain through and through, occasionally administering paralytics but never anaesthesia to his victims. Their pain gave the experience a reality that no one could run from and imbued their meat with a specific cocktail of flavours that Hannibal had grown to appreciate.

For the poor, quivering girl in his trunk, he thought he could show a little more mercy, for Will. She had not committed any acts that condemned her in Hannibal's mind. She did not need to see his face now, nor feel the pain she had in her last life.

Hannibal administered the sedatives and watched her drift off into the last peaceful sleep that she would ever have. He was grateful to be alone again, without even her frantic eyes tracking him. He felt rather melancholy as he took his preference of young meat. He sympathized for the young girl, so at mercy to her mind, lonely as a result of the common alienation of mental illness.

He cut her face into a Glasgow smile without really thinking about it. What would Will gather from this, and what did Hannibal want him to gather from it? He simply wanted Will to see him for who he was and realize the predicament he was in, but it was too vague, asking for too much from a fellow realist, even one with a mind like Will Graham.

He bloodied Madchen's hands and hooked them into her mouth, travelling upward as if trying to claw to her brain. Destruction of the self in an attempt to quiet the terrors coming from inside: that was something anyone could understand.

He staged her close to a community mental health clinic in town that had come under his radar for its incompetent staff and mediocre practices.

He would ensure his avoidance of Will this weekend further by staging Donald Sutcliffe's body. Jack would never let him go home with these seemingly escalating kills. Hannibal would remove his skull, light his brain on fire, and leave him at the hospital. A mirrored dichotomy of mental and physical illness taking lives all the same.

At the thought, he checked his phone again.

[1:12 pm] Will Graham: More house calls, Dr. Lecter? Or is something else keeping your attention this afternoon.

[6:13 pm] Will Graham: Do you recall that I detest mind games? Wouldn't expect you to run away like this.

Peppered throughout the day were a few missed calls from him as well. Hannibal felt clearer now that he'd gone out and bloodied his hands to release some tension, and with it came a feeling of shame for ignoring Will like this. He resolved to call him when he got home.

Upon arriving home, it seemed there was no need. Will's shoes and coat were placed not-so-neatly in his foyer.

Hannibal checked the dining room and then the kitchen, where he found evidence of Will making tea that was never actually poured. He went to the sitting room next, traversing the entire ground floor, but Will was nowhere to be found.

He had the sudden image of Will, having turned his attention so directly onto Hannibal with his romantic inclinations, being so surrounded by the Ripper and the paranoia that came with it, suddenly deciding to search Hannibal's house. Would Will find the hidden door to the basement and all that sat below the ground floor? Would he learn the truth without any of that, discovering a piece of evidence in the house that was enough for his mind even if no one else's?

Hannibal slipped off his shoes and kept his footsteps silent as he entered the pantry where the basement door was. He listened at the door. Though Will could have closed the door behind him, he didn't see any evidence of tampering.

He made his way up the stairs next and immediately found signs of someone being there. The suit of armour he inherited from his family, standing tall in his hallway since the moment he moved in, was knocked to the floor. It didn't look damaged at first glance, but it made it immediately clear that something was wrong.

Hannibal's room was still dark but he quickly spotted the still figure curled up at the foot of his bed, not unlike a family's over-attached mutt. Will's arms were crossed and he huddled forward as if to preserve body heat, but he hadn't grabbed any of the blankets below him, leaving the bed fully made.

Hannibal approached him carefully, but Will did not stir. Will was radiating heat and coated in a thin layer of sweat. It was clear that his fever had severely worsened sometime in the evening, and Hannibal wasn't sure if it was before he arrived here or after. He had seemed himself in the text messages from not so long ago. He didn't even react to Hannibal's touch when he felt his forehead.

He did not truly have assurance when it came to Will's health in this world. No matter the course the encephalitis took before, it would be influenced by Will's mental state, exacerbated by his stress, and impacted by how able and willing he was to adequately take care of himself.

It would have been a fascinating study had Will's life not been so precious to him. And that truth of the matter was at the forefront of his mind—Will *was* precious to him.

Any consideration to get Will treatment felt incompatible with Hannibal's need to keep Will ignorant. Hannibal was already becoming more paranoid the closer Will got to him, as was evident by his sudden panic downstairs. He needed to subsequently influence Will more than before, stop him from finding out the truth before he was ready, and keep him alive. With the nature of encephalitis, time was steadily ticking.

Hannibal pushed his hair out of his face. Will's eyes twitched below his eyelids rapidly and Hannibal could only guess the kinds of fever dreams the man was having.

He pulled back the covers on one side of his bed and then rearranged Will's body until he could fit his arms under Will's back and thighs. As he lifted Will, an arm came up to grip his shoulder.

He carried Will to the proper spot on the bed before he could twist out of Hannibal's grip. Will groaned as he landed in the cold spot of his sheets.

He began undressing him, pulling off his sweater, flannel, and undershirt with jostling that made Will grimace in discomfort. He then pulled off his socks and khakis. Will twitched, his hands travelling inward out of self-consciousness. For his comfort, Hannibal pulled the sheet over him.

Hannibal grabbed two washcloths and wet them with cold water, propping one under the nape of Will's neck and the other over his forehead. He checked his temperature orally, holding his jaw steady. It beeped at 102.1 F. His lack of awareness might have been a result of losing time rather than the fever. Hannibal could bring it down himself. He set up an IV of saline to keep him hydrated and administered an antipyretic to decrease his fever.

"Mm… Hannibal?"

Hannibal put a hand on his forehead to keep him down. "It is important you rest. All will be taken care of."

"Just tell me what changed," Will said.

"Hm?"

Will shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut against the lamp Hannibal had turned on.

"If you're referring to my silence the last day, I apologize. It is nothing you need to worry about," Hannibal said.

Will shook his head more frantically and Hannibal had to hold onto the cloth to keep it in place. "You don't understand," he mumbled. His head collapsed to the side and he said no more.

Hannibal watched him for another moment and then turned off the light. There was a chance his ramblings were nonsensical, but he wanted to follow every one of Will's thoughts to completion anyway, like he could find the truth of Will in his sick, vulnerable self.

He left to make soup and tidied up between bouts of simmering. By the time he climbed the stairs with a bed tray, a glass of freshly squeezed juice, and two bowls of soup, Will was well enough to sit up at Hannibal's presence. His tired eyes were sharp with awareness and a hint of bashfulness.

Hannibal set the tray over Will's lap without a word. Will breathed in deeply.

"Chicken soup?" he asked.

“A classic that cannot be replaced,” Hannibal said with some melancholy. He opened his mouth to explain the properties of it, but then realized he didn’t particularly want to. He hadn't even had black silkie chicken on hand. He walked around the other side of the bed to sit next to Will and grabbed his own bowl to hold against his chest as he ate.

Will took a bite with a slightly trembling hand. He leaned forward over the tray so he wouldn’t spill on the bed, and by the time he sat back he looked weak and tired again.

“My dogs—” he muttered, shifting on the spot as if to get up, but Hannibal put a hand on his arm.

“I already called Alana. She’s likely feeding them right this second.”

Will sat back and nodded in acknowledgment. He shook the arm that had the IV in it. “What did you give me?”

“Simply a measure to hydrate you and get your fever down faster than oral intake would.”

“I’m sure that comes in handy for hangovers,” Will said.

“It would.” Hannibal watched him from the side.

Will took another bite, dropping more soup than he got to his mouth. He looked down at his lap.

“I didn’t mean to come here and immediately crash. I meant it to be an ambush, but a nice one at that. Save whatever complications were popping up between us. What was I doing when you got here?”

“You don’t remember?”

Will shook his head, looking away.

“You were simply laying on my bed, asleep, so I moved you and tucked you in. Nothing of concern, aside from the armour outside laying on the floor.”

Will leaned forward to look outside the doorway where the armour was set up again.

“Sorry about that. It might have been self-defence. Medieval weaponry before me and all.”

Hannibal schooled his face into the slightest of amusement.

“And what exactly is hurting you so badly?” Will asked. His discomfort must have shone through. Hannibal prepared to shake his head, but Will didn’t take to his lies well.

“Simply my mind,” Hannibal said.

“Simply,” Will parroted with a scoff.

“The least simple of them all, but thankfully accompanied by a notable lack of bodily concern.” He wished he could feel those stab wounds that punctured his vital organs, but there wasn’t even a phantom ache left behind.

“You know I study psychology too right, and all the consequences that come with it?”

“I am aware of those consequences, and fortunately aware enough to know I’m in control and not at risk of self-harm or other consequences.”

“You’re in denial.”

“I assure you I’m not.”

Will looked sideways at him, and then lifted a red date to his mouth, chewing roughly.

“Do you regret the other night?” Will finally asked.

“I find regret an unproductive pastime, just as much as I can’t imagine living a life without regrets. You are often the outlier to my conflict, as I can rarely find it in me to truly detest anything I do to you or you do to me. I am too fond of the experiences you award to me.”

“A very charming way to describe how bad you feel about it, I would hate to know you *detested* it.”

“I want you to know the nuance of my feelings, not a simple word that leaves you room to make your own assumptions.”

“I still imagine you want me to make things more interesting, but since I’ve been sick I’ve mostly just wanted something nice. Normal. Uncomplicated.”

Will would never be normal, and he understood where he was coming from. “I can understand the appeal of that far more than I did before I met you. There’s nothing wrong with you Will.”

“Why does that sound like the start of ‘it’s not you, it’s me.’”

“I would never push you away because I thought I wasn’t good enough for you.”

Will smiled. “Now that I can believe.”

The lightness returned between them, but there was more Hannibal wanted to know.

“At the height of your fever, you asked me to tell you what had changed. Do you know what you meant by that?”

Will looked surprised. “I can guess. It’s been on my mind lately.”

“Care to enlighten me?”

“I never really knew you well, but I felt like I could have been on the path to knowing you, if I cared enough to try. I don’t know if I was just overly confident or making assumptions, I really don’t, but when I actually tried to get to know you, you drifted further away and felt like a stranger to me. Maybe it’s the way you’ve been caught by this unreality. Maybe I was never close to knowing you at all.”

“I see,” Hannibal said. Will had felt like a stranger to him too, but he knew it was only him that changed. It was saddening that Will felt the same. Emotional distance did not fit what either of them needed.

Will swirled his spoon through the soup left at the bottom of the bowl. “It doesn’t have to be an issue.”

“No?”

Will nodded resolutely. “Of course not. It just means we get to know each other now.”

It sounded so simple coming from Will. Could it be that simple?

“Can I be honest with you?” Will asked. “My fever’s gone down. I had a good rest. This bed is like a fucking cloud. Barring the symptoms we’re still trying to sort out, I really don’t think I’m the one in need of care tonight, not imminently anyway. I think it’s you that’s in the pit right now.”

Hannibal couldn’t hold back a smile at Will’s choice of words. It felt not untrue. “Is that right?”

Will pulled the IV out of his own arm with a wince and dropped the line to the side. “You’re barely talking. I at least know you well enough to tell what a warning sign that is. Save the soup for when we have the appetite. Let’s go.”

“What are we going to do?”

Will moved the tray and crawled out of bed, pulling on his clothes and not stopping for Hannibal to follow.

His anxious anticipation turned out to be entirely unwarranted. What Will wanted to do was far simpler than he expected.

It took very little time for Will to convince Hannibal of some dessert pie. He conceded that baking would be a good distraction and they set out to make a strawberry-rhubarb pie, then used up the rest of the dough for a banana cream pie, Will’s admitted favourite after pumpkin. It felt strangely easy just to do what Will said for once.

He wasn’t used to seeing Will act so caring. Not that he didn’t think he was capable of it, but their relationship had always been oriented toward Will needing care, until care was the last thing on Will’s mind. Hannibal always made sure to present himself as capable and stable so that Will would lean on him.

He knew it would be difficult to retain this side of Will once he revealed who he was. Will didn't take deception or change particularly well. The Will in his mind certainly had no sympathy for Hannibal. At least it was genuine now, even if Will was operating under his imagined conception of Hannibal.

They ate thin slices of pie by the fire, but he knew the consumption was not part of this exercise, it was creation at Will's side. A familiar activity to settle his mind back to what it was, and he appreciated it.

Will was clearly crashing after the work on their feet. The room was slowly warming but it was nothing compared to Will's sleepy smile or his lack of barriers. Will was something to fall into.

Hannibal was considering how he could best manoeuvre them to get closer when Will laid back on the couch of his own volition and put out a hand. Hannibal crawled over him and settled down carefully. He was delightfully surprised by how well he fit over Will's chest. If he was too heavy, Will didn't say. It was nice to feel the expansion of Will's lungs and the level beating of his heart below him. It was something real. A body he could break, a body that could break him, and for once they were doing something entirely kind and simple.

"Did something happen in your other reality?" Will asked softly. Hannibal could tell that it had been on his mind, that he had been waiting for a chance to ask.

"Yes," he admitted. "I broke my heart."

Will ran a soothing hand down his spine. "I have you here. And I won't do that. I'll try my best not to."

"I know. My apologies, Will."

"Just don't go quiet on me," Will said, rubbing his back. "I don't like not being able to reach you and wondering what's going on in your mind."

Hannibal nodded in acknowledgement. He was starting to believe that, of all the miseries one could inflict on another, of the numerous savageries that he *had* inflicted upon others throughout his life, that silence must be the cruellest punishment of them all.

They stayed pressed together until their skin stuck together with sweat, warmed to the edge of discomfort. Hannibal dozed off and even the times he blinked awake for a few seconds, reality was coated with the blissful pleasantness of a good dream and the feeling of Will's arms around him.

Their nap only lasted until Will's phone went off with Jack's neediness, and Hannibal was to blame there, but really it was for the best.

After all, the nighttime was when he would seek Donald Sutcliffe and set things a little more right in this world. He doubted the pain of Will's absence from his mind would ever subside until his unlikely return, but Hannibal would continue to live his life. Just like he always did.

History

Chapter Notes

> quick note, there will be no chapter this coming tuesday because i will be out of town (torn away from a reliable internet connection 😢). updates will resume as normal on friday!

Hannibal's memory palace was crafted of comfort and beauty that he had meticulously cultivated into a place he could live out the rest of his days, but it took effort to maintain that beauty. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say it took effort to keep the darkness out.

Castle Lecter and the surrounding woods were the first construction in his mind and stood grandly and menacingly in the very centre. They reached into the sky, visible from all angles no matter the grand cathedrals or giant observatories that he placed stretching out from that black hole at the centre. The castle always lingered in his periphery no matter where he was, but he usually managed to ignore the blurry and distant figure that crept up on him.

Ever since Will sought out his past and stepped onto those grounds, the property was harder to ignore.

He hadn't realized how necessary Will's presence had been to distract him from it. He barely thought about that darkness when Will was near. Will's mind was so steady, so conducive for that world between reality and dreams, that he must have been the stability that kept Hannibal from slipping.

Now he felt as though he was bound to find himself lost in those halls, falling through that rotten floor to the place that held what he could never face.

It wasn't so simple as avoiding his memory palace entirely. He didn't particularly enjoy being in his memory palace these days, but he needed to know if Will returned. He had to try. If he could catch Will peeking into those rooms again, existing in a hidden corner, he might be able to talk to him. If Hannibal could talk to him, he could convince him to return.

He searched through his mind in his waking hours and while he slept. He traveled the grounds in a methodical fashion, spiralling back in time and closer and closer to the horror in the centre, taking every precaution to not fall in entirely. He did not stop to enjoy any of the sights or sounds of his beloved palace. None of it held appeal anymore.

He woke up with a start multiple times a night like his memory palace was the worst nightmare he could be trapped in.

Sometimes he thought he felt Will's presence somewhere just beyond his reach, but then again, he'd preserved a thousand Wills in his mind in countless static moments and conversations and imaginations. Every insight he'd gathered from him through both honest and dishonest means was tucked away for future use. He held in his mind Will shivering with fever on the offset of an induced seizure and he held Will poised and thrumming with his cunning intellect and dark gift. He cherished each beautiful, painful, fascinating moment that they'd had, but the problem was that they would never change. Will was hardly a slice of himself without the agency that made him so difficult to predict.

It helped him to appreciate the moments he still got with Will in *this* world, but he would never entirely replace the man he longed for.

He looked to distraction, disappointed in himself for getting so caught up in the things he could not control. To begin, he turned to his social world and invited Jack and Bella to dinner.

It was time to acknowledge what else had changed in his new world.

"It's just me," Jack said at the door, holding a very thoughtful 2008 Pahlmeyer Proprietary Red Wine. "Bella sends her regrets. She was feeling a little under the weather."

Hannibal gestured him inside. "I'm very sorry to hear that." He wouldn't be able to express just how sorry he really was. Cancer was unforgiving in any world, and he would have liked to see Bella around for longer, no matter how beautifully dignified she was in her last weeks.

Jack waved him away and Hannibal took his coat. "Ah, flu season. It comes with the travel. I suppose you would know—you've been sick all this time?"

Hannibal only gave a brisk nod.

"Anyway, I hope this doesn't put a dent in your meal plan. I'll eat her portion if it helps the situation."

Hannibal chuckled with him. It had been so long since Jack had been his cheery, cordial self with Hannibal. He barely remembered this side of him, but he knew he had, at one point, dearly enjoyed visiting with Jack and indulging his truly wonderful appetite. His memories must have soured with Jack's eventual brand of suspicion. Either Hannibal's memories were imperfectly recalled, or he just did not reflect on the past as often as he perhaps should.

"I hope you'll allow me to send some food home for her, but I promise you I won't let you leave hungry." Hannibal winked. "Come."

Jack followed him to the kitchen. "I know you mean it when you say that, and that's why I'll never turn down your dinner party invitations. Even one as last minute as this."

“I’m sure you’ve noticed that haute cuisine often relies on small, limited portions meant to be enjoyed across multiple courses. *Dégustation*, which first originated in France in the early 20th century. Some consider how each subsequent bite will taste less delectable than the first, so they manufacture restriction and variety. This offers a diverse and heightened experience to the senses, while developing a more social rather than practical atmosphere. ”

Hannibal pulled out Jack’s chair for him to sit then grabbed the wine to pour.

“It is more common in parts of Europe for meals to be a careful, appreciative experience with good wine and conversation. However, in America, one goes to a restaurant and expects to be full. I find it to be a comforting prospect, to be given far more than you could ever eat. While there is certainly a time and a place for limitation, I appreciate abundance and I have adapted this principle into my own meals—an experience can be created without letting anyone go hungry for too long.”

“My mother would feed us until we were sick if she could,” Jack said. “As excessive as it felt, you always knew it meant she loved you that much. I reckon she didn’t know where to else put it, so she stuffed it in our bellies where she’d see it grow. And boy did I grow.”

Hannibal smiled bittersweetly. No matter the truth of his mostly privileged upbringing, he could never remember much other than starving.

“Excuse me. This conversation will best be had while filling our own bellies.”

He left to retrieve their first course. He slowed as he reached the kitchen, feeling a true flash of déjà vu. Every meal they had ever shared together had been a performance on his part, but how strange it was to do so after joining together in such personal ways.

He and Will had always managed to be so in tune with each other through their conversations while barely ever touching. His and Jack’s relationship was as platonic as shared wine and sorrows could be, but as soon as they came together in truth, they exploded in a meeting of bodies and weapons. Jack battered Hannibal, and Hannibal could only accept what he felt he must do. They were more or less equally matched, and each thrown hit said more than any words ever could.

What Hannibal did not respect and still could not comprehend was the simple bullet Jack put to his head. He stopped playing the game. He gave up his own satisfaction, his own *life,* for a chance to make it all stop. He gave up on Will, too. He wanted to step into that dining room and say, *Jack, why’d you give up?*

He wanted to teach Jack that there was more to life than simple justice, but Jack always was stubborn in his beliefs.

The man in the other room deserved none of his resentment. He was merely a blank slate compared to the man who was apparently so broken that he pulled the trigger that hit him right back. Hannibal’s grudge existed without a place to put it.

Hannibal was surprised to find that instead, he was rather longing for their return to a friendship. Jack was defined by his proximity to the darkness and he met it with

determination, yet he still knew how to enjoy himself. He was thoughtful, perceptive, and prepared to bring Hannibal behind the scenes for more experiences. Hannibal enjoyed their time if nothing else, and sometimes that must be cherished, even if it could not last.

He knew he was dawdling. He returned to the dining room promptly.

“My meals are a show of my affection as well. I appreciate your friendship, Jack,” Hannibal said, setting down their plates and taking his seat with a brief hand on Jack’s shoulder.

Jack looked surprised yet touched. It was early in their friendship for Hannibal to be so sentimental, but one could also say they’d hurt each other too much to ever warrant sentimentality. Hannibal respected Jack Crawford despite all of it.

“Well, that’s kind of you to say. I do as well.”

“I like to practice indulgence in all parts of my life. It is too easy to lose what you have, and the easiest path is hardly ever what will satisfy you.” Hannibal savoured a bite for just a moment.

“Nothing about my life is easy, but I’m not so sure that means it’s indulging anything but my high blood pressure.”

“Will has been busy. How is it for you?”

“The work these days seems to be bringing too many questions and not enough victory. The public may not have a fair comparison, but these cases are truly unprecedented. Morale is low; the department is feeling humiliated. *I’m* feeling humiliated, frankly. It’s one guy—according to Will at least, though of course those facts are relatively corroborated by the patterns—and we still can’t get him. I’ve been really wanting to ask, how does Will seem to you these days? To *me* he’s been distracted, distant, barely responsive at times. But when I ask, he says therapy is just about the best thing he’s got lately. I want to know what he’s told you.”

Hannibal leaned forward, putting on a more serious expression. “As happy as I may be with Will’s commitment to our therapy, he continues to deal with a great amount of stress. He’s confused and suffering from that same lack of victory as your team is. Jack, I don’t know if he’s in the mental state to continue working on this case. Not until we figure out whether it’s mental illness or something physical that is ailing him. I wasn’t going to tell you until I knew, but you’re right that he has been distant. He’s dissociating and losing time. The other day he developed a fever, suggesting that whatever it is that’s happening is reaching his immune system too.”

Jack tilted his head. “Will doesn’t say he’s *confused.* He said he’s getting closer and closer, but that he can’t be sure. I’m bothered that he’s not letting anyone help him. I wanted to know if he’s told you what his lead is.”

Hannibal stilled. Will thought he had a lead?

“He believes he’s getting closer to the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“That’s what he says. He doesn’t seem as lost as you say… aside from how distracted he seems at times. You really think he’s just confused?”

Hannibal decided to be honest. He was at a loss otherwise.

“Will hasn’t told me anything about this supposed lead.”

“Yeah, well he hasn’t told anyone else either. Says he needs times to recreate the Ripper’s thought process. No tangible evidence for anyone else to look into.”

“Strange,” Hannibal said. “I would watch Will closely. These may be delusions he’s feeding into me. If you report back what he’s thinking, I can compare it to what he says in our appointments.”

Jack nodded, furrowing his eyebrows. “I appreciate you on the other end of this, but if Will is any help in catching the Ripper, then I need him on it.”

“I understand,” Hannibal muttered, furrowing his eyebrows. “If anyone can catch the Ripper, it will be Will.”

Cleaning up from dinner with Jack, Hannibal wasn’t sure what to think. Was Will lying to keep Jack off his case? Or was he lying to investigate Hannibal? As much as it stung to consider, it explained one reason why Will would try to get so close to him all of a sudden. He thought the denial of what they could have in their memory palace was only an emotional response, but could Will really be deceiving him in this timeline? Again?

Genuine delusion was always a possibility at this stage in Will's life. If there was anything Hannibal could be certain of, it was the fire that set his brain alight and would continue to smoulder until he could get his hands on the right steroids and immunotherapy.

Jack had concluded their dinner by asking Hannibal for help with the Ripper’s profile. Hannibal would at least be able to get closer and observe Will himself.

Only he wasn’t certain he could wait that long.

He dialled Will’s phone number and then put his landline between his shoulder and cheek while he polished his wine glasses.

Will answered quickly. “Hannibal. Glad that you haven’t dropped off the face of the earth.”

“You as well. I wanted to see how you were doing. Did your fever stay at bay?”

“I’ve been okay on that front. Just the headaches, but that’s nothing new. How are you?”

“I’m well, thank you.” Hannibal slowed his actions so he could hear any reaction on the other line. “I had dinner with Jack Crawford tonight.”

“Ah, that’s why I was left alone for a night,” Will joked.

Was it simply a good-humoured comment? Or an avoidant one?

“You are welcome, in that case. Jack seems in dire need of a break. Any updates on what took you away from me the other night?”

“Actually, I don’t know if this is best to hear from me, but there’s something you’ll want to know.”

“What is it?”

“The neurologist you sent me to, Dr. Suttcliffe? I know he was your colleague, I don’t know how close you were, but… we found his body.”

Hannibal paused for effect. “Donald. Oh my.”

“Yep.”

“The Ripper?”

“Seems like it. He was found just outside of Johns Hopkins. The cameras had been disabled but they came on just in time to see his head spontaneously light his head on fire. His brain had been removed and replaced with a fuse. The result wasn’t pretty.”

“It doesn’t sound like it.”

“I got an email earlier. I’m going in to work tomorrow because they think they caught some evidence.”

“Evidence?” Hannibal froze. He wouldn’t have.

“Something on one of the other cameras. It’s not a clear photo, but they’re trying to enhance it as we speak.”

“The Chesapeake Ripper doesn’t leave evidence.”

“I was surprised too. But if he’s human, he’s bound to make mistakes sometimes.”

Hannibal knew he was distracted and missing Will as he killed Donald Sutcliffe, but he had never had struggled to multitask before. He chose Johns Hopkins because he was familiar with the site and had copied key codes for the security building. Would he really have missed a camera?

He clued into something else. “If he’s human?” he asked.

Will chuckled. “I’m just being facetious, Hannibal.”

“My apologies. This news has taken me by surprise.”

“Understandable.”

“This is the first murder that is directly connected to you,” Hannibal said.

“Well, arguably, it’s more connected to you.”

“Do you think the Ripper would be aware of me?”

“Hard to say. I don’t know what I’m thinking these days.”

Strange. “Why don’t you talk me through it, and perhaps you’ll find yourself enlightened?”

Will hesitated. “Not today. My head doesn’t agree with *thinking* much right now. Just… tell me more about your day?”

Hannibal breathed in deeply. Something was amiss, but he couldn’t be sure what it was yet.

First thing Monday morning, Hannibal returned to the Bureau for the first time in this new world. He introduced himself to Beverly Katz, Jimmy Price, and Brian Zeller and nodded humbly as Jack thanked him for coming in. Hannibal moved to stand by Will, who was rather quiet and subdued, cradling his coffee in the corner. He wasn’t sure what to think of his silence, but Will offered him a small smile when Hannibal squeezed his shoulder.

“I heard from Will that you may have finally caught photo evidence of the Ripper?” Hannibal asked.

“Yeah, and I’ve seen better photos of Bigfoot,” Zeller quipped, shooting a look at Price that made Hannibal guess he had sparked the continuation of a fight.

“It’s not *so* bad—”

Beverly butt in and cut Jimmy off. “While it’s too blurry to pick out facial features, we can assume some details on his stature and skin tone. It also at least partially solves the mystery of his lack of evidence. By the glare, it seems he wears some kind of protective plastic suit.”

“If we let this one get out, we’re gonna be getting serial killers wrapping themselves in saran wrap,” Zeller said.

Hannibal feigned casualness as he ambled closer to Beverly where she was taking a large photograph out of a folder. He tilted his head, trying not to seem too eager as he took in the photo of himself. He recognized the area in Johns Hopkins. How could he have missed this spot?

It was a photo of him carrying the body of Donald Sutcliffe. With the angle of the photo, the side of his cheek was just barely visible. It was unnerving to recognize himself, but he knew it was not clear enough for anyone else to catch the likeness.

The lighting made his clothing difficult to make out where the sheen of the plastic reflected the light of the moon. There was something spectral about the photograph; the sheen, dark twin of himself creeping through the shadows like someone that didn't belong. A visitor to this world, nonhuman.

"Anyone you know, doc?" Brian asked. He was teasing, but there was a sharp edge to it. An obnoxiousness that Hannibal had noticed in the past only when the topic of Will came up, and it seemed to be a permanent feature when Will was here. Brian felt as though he had something to prove, and it glowed starkly envious. Hannibal was starting to understand why Will lingered in the background when he was here.

Reassured that the photo evidence hadn't captured his likeness, Hannibal hung back with Will and observed more than participated.

Will was quiet throughout their meeting, responding when spoken to but not saying much else whatsoever.

Hannibal spent a few days alternating between burying himself in work, perusing his mind palace with dwindling hope, and calling Will enough to avoid him showing up at Hannibal's home again. He wasn't quite able to shake the absence of his mind's Will or the lingering paranoia about what he suspected here. It was in his best interest to take a break from killing until he could be more certain of his safety.

Days passed by, and with them, so did the tether between him and the Will in his mind, or so it seemed. Will was stubborn—terrifyingly so. If he was to achieve some sort of peace, what was keeping him from staying out of their shared memory palace for years, or even forever? Hannibal imagined getting a glimpse of him on his deathbed and knowing it was all too late. Will could simply be absent forever and Hannibal would have no way of knowing why. He could be dead already, succumbed to his drink and feasted on by his dogs on the floor of his little house.

Only he was certain he would feel it if Will died. Parts of his palace should surely crumble without Will's share supporting the weight.

Bedelia du Maurier noticed his restlessness. Her perceptiveness and curiosity were why he chose her over their other colleagues, but he thought he could usually hide it better than this. Perhaps his intimacy with her behind the veil had facilitated a natural openness. They had grown an understanding of each other on their Italy rendezvous and knew each other's… insides well.

Their thrumming tension was now only satiated in half of the parties. Hannibal had welcomed Bedelia into his bed; Bedelia was still cautiously fascinated by him.

“It is curious that you seem so determined to stick with this facade that you have been sick. We both know my assistance to you is dependent on your transparency, limited as it may be,” she said.

It was their first appointment in a long while, which was of course much longer for him. It had taken him some pushing to accept this appointment.

“Discovered antiques with missing pieces can be understood in their own way—the misplacement just as central to the story as the original artifact.”

Bedelia stared at him sternly. “Less than ideally if it has been vandalized since.”

Hannibal tilted his head, not bothering to reply. It was all the same to him. This was his story after all.

“Things have been different between Will and I,” he said.

“How so?”

“We slept together, for one.”

“To what purpose?”

“The usual, base ones.”

She crossed her legs. “I’ll be honest, I did not anticipate your attentions turning onto Will Graham in this nature. Your fascination with him held a degree of separation and certainly a power differential that I do not need to lecture you about. Now I wonder if you had led *me* astray, or yourself.”

“Much has changed since I last saw you,” Hannibal said, turning away. For one thing, he was realizing, he did not particularly want to see her.

Bedelia did not evolve in their time together so much as harden into the iceberg that she was, sharp if anyone was to beat themselves against her, but passive and prosaic otherwise. She was a sight to behold certainly, but grew uninspiring quickly, and without the depths to suggest it would turn out any differently this time. As above, so below.

It was a shame that he had chosen her as a replacement of sorts. Nothing made Will’s absence in Italy more stark than her company. It even felt wrong to be here and not with him now. A betrayal of a different nature.

Even his desire for her *taste* had fizzled. It felt most appropriate before, in some desperate attempt to end things off as decadent as they had started, but then she had escaped him and he let her go. He expected that one day he would take what he was due, but it did not feel imperative any longer.

She was waiting for him to expand.

“I am going to take a break from therapy,” he said.

She lowered her gaze, thoughtful of his new manner, and evidently a little annoyed at his elusiveness.

“I would recommend that you allow me to refer you if therapy with myself is not adequate.”

“I understand that you are obliged, but I can find myself a fitting therapist if I so desire.”

She was somber. He wondered what won out today—her disappointment or her relief? She sensed the danger he posed to her, but so too was she unfailingly curious to see things to their inevitable end. Her self-preservation rivalled her self-assurance that she would survive. If it didn’t, he imagined they never would have had this arrangement. One day, when he could look back on their time together with more appreciation, he would show her.

He prided himself on his courtesy if nothing else, so he suggested a glass of wine and they conversed like colleagues until their appointed time concluded. He didn’t bother to waste a minute more.

As he left Bedelia house, he had the sensation of being watched. A prickle on the back of his neck, movement beckoning his attention.

He peered down the street as he reached for his car door just in time to see a vehicle pull out and turn the corner. He recognized that car, so out of place in high-end Riverside, Baltimore and speeding notably fast out of view.

It couldn’t have been…

The compact little toy of a 2004 Volvo that he was certain Will could afford better than was not a car he saw often, and not in that baby blue colour.

Hannibal thrust himself into his Bentley and pulled out with only the most necessary checks of the environment around him. He sped down the street fast enough to elicit a worrying screech from the tires, and skidded around the corner. He dearly hoped that Bedelia wasn’t watching him through the window. Car racing was not his forte, but he needed to know.

He caught a glimpse of the back end of the vehicle disappearing far down the road behind another turn and Hannibal sped after him.

He turned out of the residential district and had to slam on the breaks before he hit the stopped cars in front of him. He peered around them and past the red light, but could no longer find that elusive car that suggested he was in far more danger than he knew.

Sound

Chapter Notes

> I'm a couple of days later than I first said I'd be, wish I had an AO3-typical whacky excuse for you all! should be back on schedule from now on ☺

Time was never quite consistent, he supposed, and not just because he'd been thrown back in time.

There were large black spots in his memory that made his childhood seem not like the endless paralysis he knew it was, but like a sequence of brief, otherworldly intervals. He did not fully recall his last days with his sister, only later retrieving bits and pieces of information from an induced psychotic episode from his own combination of thiopental sodium and two other hypnotics.

Beyond the blur of post-traumatic stress disorder and the inescapable hormones of adolescence, he experienced the same deceptiveness of the passage of time as most. He occasionally felt a surreal wonder at how old he'd become—at how much the prime of his life had slipped through his fingers. Sometimes it felt as though his life never restarted after Mischa's death until the moment he met Will Graham, and his subsequent time with Will held the constant, dizzying sense of never being quite enough.

Time had escaped him yet again, in that flawed human way it tended to. He realized it when he hesitated a moment longer with his finger on his appointment book.

Franklyn's appointment was in two days. It was two days past the time that Douglas Wilson should have been on a stage making more pleasant melodies through his throat than he had with his bow in hand. Hannibal counted back the dates in his head to confirm.

It was clear to him now that Tobias Budge's becoming came with his desire to connect with Hannibal. Hannibal hadn't been certain before that their acquaintance wasn't a happenstance co-occurrence with Tobias' desire to take to the stage, but Hannibal must have played a larger part in Tobias' fate than he realized.

He could not simply sit back and see what happened like he did with Will's encephalitis diagnosis. A disease crossed time and space with more or less predictable manifestations, but a killer was susceptible to any myriad of factors. Hannibal had incidentally changed fate by not attending the opera where he first met Mr. Budge.

Perhaps somewhere, deep down in his subconscious, he'd allowed this to happen. He would not follow the will of the world, not in this.

He sent an email to Tobias' business account and then fiddled with his harpsichord with his tuning hammer until it was believably out of tune. Nobody needed to know any better that he had tuned all of his instruments by ear since he knew how to play.

He couldn't deny his urge, whether it had been subconscious or not up to this point, to test Will Graham one more time. He needed to know who that man before him really was—friend or foe.

Tobias came by that very evening, no doubt extending his work hours to meet Hannibal. He wore a classic fitted suit and questioned Hannibal about his interest in composition just as he had the first time they met. Hannibal welcomed him with a proffered glass of wine, and the perceived affability beckoned the confession Hannibal had been waiting for within minutes.

"I must admit something I omitted in my initial email, which is that I was already familiar with you prior to our correspondence," Tobias told him.

Hannibal tilted his head in faux obliviousness. "If I have already made your acquaintance and it slipped my mind, then I do apologize."

"No, nothing like that. I am familiar with a patient of yours—Franklyn Froideveaux. He speaks very highly of you, and he had hoped to run into you at one of our recent engagements where he could introduce us. It is perhaps more fair to say he tried to fabricate the meeting. I was grateful to see your name in my inbox offering a chance to meet without Franklyn's brand of passion mediating our eventual acquaintance, as I am sure you can understand."

Hannibal ducked his head in a knowing gaze. "What a coincidence this happens to be then."

"You see, from what I've heard from Franklyn, I expect that we could be great friends, Doctor Lecter."

"I find myself curious of the things you expect will connect us. However, I should inform you that, at risk of breaching patient confidentiality, I cannot discuss my opinion of Franklyn with your awareness of our professional relationship."

"Of course, and I would not ask you to. I do not have any urge to speak of Franklyn while I am here."

"What would you prefer to speak about?"

Tobias grinned, standing up to face him. The harpsichord was still ringing out of tune from Tobias' testing when he spoke.

"I'd like to learn about you."

With the snare set, Hannibal put his plan into motion. Almost immediately after Tobias left that night, Hannibal hunted.

This time, he knew to look for the vehicle trailing him from afar. Tobias was curious if they were as alike as he expected, and Hannibal intended to show him. He drove to a quiet outstretch of Baltimore where he knew his unsatisfactory travel agent of a few years past liked to have his last smoke before flagging a taxi home.

Hannibal snatched him off the street in open view of Tobias' gaze so nothing of his vocation could be misconstrued. He would not present the travel agent in public, it being too risky with Will's current suspicions, but neither did he want the meat to go to waste.

Once he had the man secured in his trunk, he walked with purpose toward Tobias' vehicle parked in a perpendicular alley, taking to the road so he would block Tobias' main way out. His reverse lights came on, but Hannibal signalled him to stay while digging in his coat pocket.

Tobias reluctantly rolled down his window to see what Hannibal was offering. He passed him a handwritten invitation with his address written across.

"Apologies for the late notice, but I'd like to extend an invitation for dinner tomorrow night. I believe I've gathered far too much food to finish myself. You wouldn't mind giving me some assistance, would you?" Hannibal said.

He promptly returned to his own vehicle without allowing Tobias a word.

It had been days since he'd seen Will, and he knew he could not continue this for much longer without drawing his ire again. It was hard not to feel unfaithful simply by having dinner with Tobias. Replacing Will with Tobias, and Will with himself—he was suddenly preoccupied with the question of fidelity. He had never been a particularly monogamous lover, but he'd never expected to meet someone who made the rest of the world seem unbearable in comparison. Someone to sacrifice the rest for.

Which was to say, he suspected Tobias had some more salacious expectations when it came to him.

In his past life, Hannibal was too disinterested in their potential friendship to engage with Tobias past the surface. In this world, he'd opened up the floodgates and Tobias seemed inclined to overstay his welcome.

Hannibal indulged him, knowing that hope for connection was what would spark Tobias' true becoming. For Hannibal's acceptance, he would finally take his music to the public stage, but Hannibal couldn't help but be wary of the attention. Their conversations played through euphemisms made true with knowing looks. Tobias was quick to recognize him as a threat

just as before, and at some point, Hannibal couldn't quite be certain whether he was being seduced or hunted.

Until Tobias kissed him.

He couldn't say it was unexpected, cornered in his library between carefully eyed drinks. Tobias' next touch was to the seam of his pants, groping shamelessly between his legs, and Hannibal grew almost certain it was something more amorous than murderous.

Hannibal cupped his face and allowed their kiss to deepen instinctively. He felt a tongue boldly licking into his mouth before Tobias tilted back just out of reach. Provocative.

"I think I'd like to see how well you sound, Doctor Lecter," Tobias said.

Tobias craved a companion to share in his passions. Hannibal had considered his desperation to be rather pathetic before he recognized the same desire in himself. His own desire came with recognizing an equal in Will, whereas he and Tobias would never be equal. That Tobias thought they could be was almost revolting.

Nonetheless, it was an intriguing proposition. If Hannibal was correct in reading this man he knew at the edge of his life, then a night of passion would undoubtedly be a violent affair. At one point, he likely would have brought Tobias to bed simply to humour him, but he couldn't help but feel a resistance too strong to surpass now.

"Not tonight," Hannibal said, clicking his mouth as he opened it, considering the taste of meat on Tobias' mouth. "It is about time you take your leave, I should think."

Tobias tilted his head, clearly put out. Hannibal didn't want to deal with his anger before he made any use of him.

"Show me how well you play and then we will see," Hannibal whispered quickly.

Hannibal could see the understanding in Tobias' hungry gaze. He stepped back.

"Thank you for dinner, Doctor Lecter, and for your wonderful accommodations. I look forward to seeing our friendship grow shortly."

Tobias flitted away, to Hannibal's relief. After all, it was only a few hours until he would see him again.

In the early hours of the morning, Hannibal seated himself in the centre of the Lyric Performing Arts Centre where the acoustics would ring most clear. There would be no more barriers for them to cross anymore. Tobias arrived, backlit and blank-faced on the stage as he took in his uninvited but fully intended-for audience. His confusion was evident on his face. He hadn't sent out Hannibal's invite yet. Tobias looked out upon what he could not and never would understand.

To his credit, Tobias didn't question it. He merely set up his cello display. The makeshift strings had already been treated, shrunk, and tanned in the way Tobias was expert at, the

man’s throat a gaping maw beyond. Tobias played a few notes, tuning his own instrument by ear in the vast concert hall.

There were only so many notes he could capture, but he played them with care. It was a composition Hannibal could only assume was the man’s own creation. He imagined it playing endlessly through his mind over the years awaiting this day he would have someone to play for. His inspiration and passion were evident in the concentration on his face and the sure movements of his hand. Hannibal could appreciate seeing his bloody serenade in full.

The composition ended. Hannibal let the cello ring through the concert hall until it buzzed with silence. He offered a few slow claps, allowing Tobias to take from it what he wanted.

He slipped out of the building before Tobias could approach him again. The last piece of the puzzle would, of course, be Will Graham himself.

Jack called him about the case early the next day. Hannibal informed him that he was too busy with appointments to attend the scene, but Will was welcome to come and consult with him in the evening.

At the insistent knock on his door, he knew things had come together exactly as planned.

“It’s almost a relief to have something new,” Will said after having updated Hannibal about Budge’s case. He circled the desk where Hannibal leaned. “That isn’t our favourite enigma nor the various domestic terrorist cases that Jack asks me about, as if I know anything much about those.”

“This is the stimulation of a new sense entirely. Reverberations of sound.”

“And it was a sight to see.”

“Did you play?”

“Only in my mind. Can’t tamper with the evidence that much,” Will muttered, running a hand over Hannibal's desk as he paced a lap behind him. “I can still hear what he was playing behind my eyes.”

“Who is he performing for?”

“I don’t know. Patron of the arts. Fellow musician. Another killer. All of the above?”

“Someone he admires.”

“A serenade,” Will confirmed, stopping at his side before leaning against the ladder. “That’s why this is new. The way he usually kills, he doesn’t get caught.”

“Does our killer fancy himself in love?”

“It’s too shallow for that. A psychopath with a new fixation. He wants to show someone how well he *plays*.”

He considered what he told Will the last time they spoke about Tobias. *Every life is a piece of music. Like music, we are finite events, unique arrangements. Sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant.* Evidently, life was not so finite as he had thought. He had yet to learn how to master this new arrangement, rid of the inherent dissonance of this world.

He was at least certain that Will’s endearing response had been true in any world. *Sometimes people were not worth hearing again.*

“Intriguing,” Hannibal said simply when Will didn’t expand. He needed to set the snare on Tobias at exactly the right moment when Will wouldn’t suspect anything beneath the surface.

His thoughts all dissipated when he met Will's gaze. Will avoided eye contact so readily during casual conversation that when his gaze refused to leave Hannibal, he felt all the more ensnared. It was the closest he ever felt to self-conscious, in the unwavering perception of Will Graham’s attention.

Will approached him without letting his gaze fall. He settled at Hannibal’s side with his hip resting against the desk, leaving little room for personal space between them.

Hannibal let his arm slip around his waist. There wasn’t much else that Hannibal could do; Will was utterly tantalizing even without offering himself up like this. He stood at Hannibal's side completely still, as if waiting for something. When Hannibal leaned in, Will tilted back his shoulders just out of reach. Hard-set lips and steady eyes—unamused.

Will opened his mouth as if to say something, but he seemed to reconsider. His mouth returned to the same hard-line as before. Hannibal recalled the suspicious Volvo he caught sight of after his appointment with Bedelia. Just what was Will thinking these days?

He couldn’t think of a way to prod him before Will was leaning in and pressing his lips to Hannibal’s. The kiss was closed-mouth, soft. Waiting for reciprocation.

Hannibal complied, cupping Will’s jaw and tilting his face up to kiss him how he liked. He didn’t want to taste another soul in his life. Sex was not often a priority for him, but he couldn’t deny how he craved Will. There didn’t seem to be much point in denying all that he wanted any longer, with damage already done and this world all he had anymore.

If this was a seduction, he wondered if the motivation included the desk they were leaning against. The thought was appealing, but so was taking Will home and making things last. Will tasted like old coffee and little else—he could probably use dinner, he thought.

He pulled back a little ways. Will kept a fist at the back of his neck, tugging a few hairs at his nape. Hannibal nearly forgot what he was going to say.

“Would you join me for dinner?” he asked.

Will's eyes flickered between Hannibal's pupils. He wasn't sure what Will saw, but in the next moment, he grabbed Hannibal's fly and yanked it open with one hand. He slipped his hand in and cupped Hannibal over his underwear without taking his eyes off Hannibal's face. Hannibal fought to remain calm in the face of Will's power move.

"Is this okay?" Will asked, as if he wasn't already squeezing with determination.

"Of course."

Anything, he wanted to tell Will. He could do anything and Hannibal would delight in it all.

Will pulled Hannibal free so his cock nestled in his open fly, quickly hardening to stand against the bottom of his vest. Will stroked him with his foreskin until he was completely hard and stopped for only a moment to spit in his hand. With each movement, he faced Hannibal more directly and crowded him into the desk.

Hannibal cupped Will's chin, holding him just a little too far back on his throat and a little too tightly. He held Will as he observed his expression in concentration. He considered whether this was all manipulation. Would Will stoop so low as to pleasure Hannibal simply to get closer to him? Perhaps the more pressing question, as Hannibal felt himself give over to the pleasure, is whether he would allow it to happen anyway.

He searched for desire in Will's face and found it, but there was something else. There was the conflict he'd come to know, almost too spot-on for the Will he'd known later in his life. He had to admit that he couldn't put anything past Will. He was a man of unending surprises.

Hannibal leaned back so more of his weight could be held up by the desk. His legs felt weak. Will followed him and kissed ravenously up the side of his throat.

He couldn't be too sure what Will was doing right now. He would have to be careful not to let anything incriminating slip. The video the other day was evidence of his new carelessness. He refused to give up his chance of freedom in this second-chance world.

His breathing quickened when he considered that the Will of this world just might want to take his life enough to fight for it.

It would be a confirmation that Will was the same as he always was. It meant he would surely survive Tobias. Everything would fall into place and he would see his partner in all his glory, even if it took a while. It also meant he was at great risk.

For now at least, he got this.

He stifled his own moan by kissing Will and allowed his orgasm to wash over him. The stains could be covered up, but he didn't want to miss a second of Will's determination. Will worked him through it, squeezing even after he was spent and dry. Hannibal endured the sensitivity, knowing Will meant for it. Will's cheeks were as pink as he imagined his own were.

When he let go, he pulled a handkerchief from his jacket and passed it to Will for his hands before cleaning himself up as best as he could. He had soiled his vest, but he didn't really mind showing it off when it was from Will's hand.

Will cleared his throat. "I'd love to join you for dinner."

Quietly amused, Hannibal put a hand around Will's waist and led him to the door. He grabbed Will's coat and opened it to let Will step into it, then smoothed it down his arms, lingering to touch him more than necessary.

His urge was too strong to ignore, and he wasn't in the business of self-denial. He bit the back of Will's neck, latched sideways onto the muscle leading up to his skull. Will locked up in his arms but didn't make a very concerted effort to break free, even as Hannibal bit down hard. Hannibal finally released his teeth and nuzzled into his back, pressing one last kiss to the reddened, indented skin before letting him go to grab his own coat.

Will released a quivering breath of air.

They sat at his dinner table, Will in the seat Tobias had sat in the night before. At a loss of how to gather any clear answers, Hannibal decided to simply ask.

"What's been on your mind, Will?"

Will sighed around a bite of not-lamb.

"I suppose the potential of your regret still."

"You assume conflicted feelings must mean regret, and so you seduced me to gain some sort of certainty about it."

"You're not the kind of person to avoid a subject. I don't like lies, especially not about something as emotionally fraught as a relationship. It's better to know."

Hannibal knew he had been avoiding their relationship, doing little more than making the most obligatory phone calls. An honest conversation was still out of the question at this point. He would have to do better to hide it, and at the same time, scope out whatever Will was thinking below the surface.

He tipped his head demurely to catch Will's eyes. "It's not regret, no. It sometimes seems as though there's little else I think about anymore but you."

Will's cheeks darkened, a ripe pink just below his eyes, but it didn't erase his irritation.

"And you mean to tell me you wouldn't be letting me know about that?"

“There is a time and a place, and I am nothing if not a patient man. I suppose I am uncertain what you wish to see from me.”

Will looked away, glowering at the tall windows rather than Hannibal. “I suppose it’s unfair to ask for more of your attention when I can’t give you mine, not with this job, but I suppose that’s what I really want.”

Complicated feelings or not, he was delighted and enamoured that Will was asking for what he wanted. How could he ever deny him?

“Then it is what you will get. Are you done with your plate?”

Will nodded and Hannibal left to retrieve dessert.

When he returned, it was with a conversation on the tip of his tongue that he hoped would steer things away from any touchy subjects and toward something a little more productive.

“There is something that’s been on my mind since you told me about this killer, and the more I consider it, the more I think it may not be a coincidence.”

Will looked up with a newfound interest. “What is it?”

“The thing is, I fear it borders on a violation of doctor-patient confidentiality.”

Will waited expectantly.

“A patient of mine recently described a colleague who has been expressing some concerning thoughts. Violent thoughts. I happen to be familiar with this colleague on a personal level—he is the owner of a string shop in Baltimore and has helped me tune my harpsichord in the past. While nothing struck me when I made his acquaintance, it may be worthwhile to interview him.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that could be something.” Will rubbed his beard, nodding. It felt right to him, Hannibal could tell. It would be impossible to change his mind now.

It was because Hannibal loved him that he needed to do this. He needed to do this to face Will again, he insisted to himself.

Will looked back up at him. “Don’t make any more appointments with him until we know, just to be safe,” he said.

Hannibal nodded in assent. “I’ll send you his contacts another time. Now come, the workday is over and you can worry about it later.”

He gestured for Will to follow, but as he did, he noticed movement out of the corner of his eyes. A dark figure out the back windows painted his memory if only for a moment, but when he looked again, there was nothing there.

He did wonder….

If his suspicions were correct, then Tobias may be even more of a threat in this world with the attachments that Hannibal had allowed to fester.

“You okay?” Will asked, following his gaze.

“I thought I saw something, but I must have been mistaken. There's a coyote in the area after some neighbourhood cats. Oh, the steep paranoia of suggestion.”

He led Will and his curious gaze away from the back door and to the sitting room. He filled Will’s hands with a generous nightcap and made him sit before taking off his own suit jacket, vest, and tie. He unbuttoned his shirt a comfortable amount and indulged in Will’s eyes on him, urging himself to forget what was to come. There was nothing else but to enjoy each other's company.

“What is this now?” Will asked.

Hannibal kneeled down in front of where he was sitting and put his hands on Will’s thighs.

“Attention,” he said simply, smiling up at Will. They could both use the pleasure here and now. He wanted Will on the edge for as long as he allowed, and so he leaned in and told him so.

Will took a long sip and got comfortable.

Justice

The sound of Will's breathy moans stayed with him. He fought for control so hard and lost it so sweetly, legs shaking beyond his ability to stop. Hannibal spent the better part of an hour on his knees, taking directions that he insisted on no matter how bashful Will was about being so selfish. It was not selfish though, not to Hannibal. He was thrilled to simply hold Will in his mouth and keep him hard while he basked in the different senses, admiring Will's growing desperation. It was better than the first spontaneous romp in the night. Hannibal wasn't holding back, even if he occasionally felt like he should.

Will came hard in his mouth and then left late in the night for his dogs despite Hannibal's insistence that he could stay.

Hannibal had some much needed rest and then woke early to a slight thrumming of anxiety. Would the interview with Tobias be today? Was there the risk, ever slight, that Hannibal would lose Will to a stroke of bad fate?

[7:30 am] Hannibal Lecter: Good morning, Will. Apologies for keeping you so late last night. I hope you had a good rest in the time you are granted between commute. Please keep me updated on your killer today.

He hoped it wasn't too transparent, but thankfully Will answered quickly.

[7:31 am] Will Graham: You don't need to apologize for anything you did late last night. OK. I will.

He distracted himself with work as best he could, but it didn't take enough of his concentration. He checked his phone incessantly throughout the day.

For a while, he perused his memory palace on the lookout for the presence he wanted, but it only made the potential of loss ring louder.

It took one wrong move—one minuscule change in the fabric of the universe—to take someone's life. He had felt so comfortable with the vulnerability of life before. What made this second chance life feel so much more precious?

He paced in his office until Franklyn arrived for his appointment. As their appointment commenced, he kept one ear turned to listen for movement out the door.

"—it's just, it's that friend I mentioned to you before. Remember when Tobias was saying those dark things? This time he said that he wanted to cut someone's throat and play it like a violin. Well, they just found somebody whose throat was cut and played like a violin! The dark jokes are one thing, but this? This is—I just don't know anymore."

Franklyn dropped his head into his hands.

"Why do you think you are Tobias' friend?" Hannibal asked.

Franklyn's head shot up. "Tobias is my best friend, we… get along. We share hobbies. The same cultural sphere. We're so alike, that's why this is so… so…."

"When he makes you uncomfortable with these comments, do you ever consider severing the friendship for good?"

"Of course not. His comments make me feel concerned. I mean, why would he say those things to me?"

"Have you ever considered that perhaps it is that you like Tobias for exactly who he is?"

Franlyn's eyes squinted with a hint of betrayal. "What are you saying to me?"

He was curious if it was possible for Franklyn to reach the conclusion himself, but then Hannibal heard it. Footsteps in the waiting room. He had no doubts about who it was.

Franklyn startled when the door opened. Hannibal merely put on a smile and raised from his spot. At last.

"Tobias," Hannibal greeted.

"Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal noted that, unlike last time, his ear had not been shot, but he was bleeding from a shallow head wound. More blood covered him than before. Things had turned out differently this time, one way or another.

"Tobias!?" Franklyn jumped up after a moment's delay.

Tobias didn't take his eyes off of Hannibal. "Franklyn, I have come to say goodbye."

"What do you mean goodbye? Oh my God, is that your blood? What *happened*?"

"The police came to question me about the murder," Tobias said.

"Shall we guess the outcome?" Hannibal looked him up and down, feigning nonchalance.

"You mean of the man you shared a meal with last night?" Tobias asked.

The realization that shot through Hannibal was ice cold, but he refused to let it show in his expression or body language.

"This is not good, this is not good, oh my God…" Franklyn muttered.

There was no point in delaying the inevitable, he thought, not when Franklyn's babbling was already so irritating. Hannibal approached the quivering man and snapped his neck with one swift movement. Somewhere along the way, he'd lost his sympathy for Franklyn, or perhaps he'd just gotten bored. He hit the floor with a resounding thud.

"Sometimes peace and quiet is preferable to any melody, don't you agree?" Hannibal asked.

“I was looking forward to that.”

“And I saved you the trouble. Now why don’t you tell me what you’ve done?”

“You know, Doctor Lecter, we could have had something good, had you been willing. Had you chosen me instead. You didn’t need to make an enemy out of me.”

Tobias threw his coat to the side to reveal his winded gut string. He let it snake out from his hand and started windmilling it menacingly.

“But you have, Doctor, made an enemy out of me. And I’m going to kill you for it.”

Hannibal watched the gut string warily. He retraced their steps from the last timeline, trying to consider how he could surpass Tobias’ longer reach with his gift of foresight. He wanted to avoid injury and wrap this up so he could confirm Will’s whereabouts as quickly as possible. He refused to jump to conclusions otherwise, though his blood already felt cold in his veins.

What if he and Will were both doomed to timelines without the other? What if the Will in his mind never even returned to learn of his fate?

He tracked Tobias’ movements as he backed away, taking cover behind the ladder.

Tobias was different this time. Hannibal had allowed him a taste, and he seemed even more determined than before. Maybe even hurting Will had spurred him on—and Hannibal didn't want to consider how hurt Will could be. Going by his dinner comment, he must be a jealous companion, and that was a dangerous thing.

The makeshift whip clipped the ladder but didn’t catch. Hannibal lunged forward anyway, but was met with a blur past his face that made his head snap back on his neck. It took him a moment to recognize the burning sensation slicing up his cheek and eye. He’d been too hasty. He retreated, blinking through the sudden fountain of red in his vision. He couldn’t see anything out of his right eye and he hoped it was the blood obscuring his sight rather than anything deeper.

It felt deep. An ache that spread to his very core.

Tobias swung down at him again. Hannibal caught the string on his forearm just as he had last time. He thrust forward with the momentum of Tobias’ hold, but Tobias blocked him, swinging him toward the desk. The string tightened, cutting through fabric and skin and Hannibal felt himself losing a hold on this predetermined fight.

Did Will succumb to the realized monster that was Tobias Budge with a possessive streak?

If Hannibal died now, would they both be given another chance?

He hit the desk and grappled for the dagger, but Tobias threw a punch at his teeth like a new kind of kiss.

He fumbled for the dagger with a new fervour before the next punch could be thrown, and got it. He gripped the handle and sliced upward to the meaty part between Tobias’ shoulder

and chest. It was too hard to see through his red, blinking eyes if he'd managed to hit his lung, but he was hopeful with the way Tobias' cry gurgled from his throat. He yanked the dagger back out and Tobias drew back, unwinding the string from his arm.

Tobias lifted the string to strike again and Hannibal willed himself to move. *Had Will moved? Had Will had Will had Will—*

A bang gave them both pause. A figure came crashing into the doorframe of the entrance, panting and bleeding in equal abundance.

Hannibal wiped the blood out of his eyes so he could be certain.

Will Graham. Alive. Here.

And as vengeance for that blood pouring down Will's temple, Hannibal didn't even have to think before he rammed his fist into Tobias' nose. It sent the man snapping backward a few feet and it was entirely worth the crack in Hannibal knuckles that reverberated up to his elbow.

Hannibal backed off when he noticed Will stumbling forward with his gun in hand. He was eager to see what he would do. He slumped against the corner of the desk, lifting a hand to his head as if to feign shock over his injuries. It wasn't hard to put on an air of disbelief—his relief was genuine and immeasurable.

To his delight, Will placed himself between Hannibal and Tobias, taking on a protective, if shaky stance. He had clearly sustained a head wound, perhaps from being slammed into a wall or some other object. He might have been knocked out, which explained Tobias' cockiness upon coming here. Cuts lined one arm where his sleeve was rolled up, the same curved slices that the sharp instrument strings left on his own skin.

Tobias eyed the gun and Will defensively, and then looked at Hannibal. His scheming little smile returned.

"Mr. Graham, perhaps you should consider who you're defending right now," he said.

Hannibal watched them carefully. Perhaps he should have struck Tobias in his larynx instead.

"Tobias, drop the weapon and lay on your stomach," Will said, still breathless. Hannibal's office was a couple of miles from Chordophone Strings, had he really run all that way with a bleeding head wound?

Tobias stayed in his spot.

"On the ground!" Will yelled with surprising authority in his voice.

Tobias smirked. "You're not the only one who has tasted his food… or him. Isn't that right Doctor Lecter? And just before your little dinner too."

Will's back tensed, though Hannibal could not see his expression from his angle.

“I will repeat my instructions one more time, and if you refuse to comply—”

“I’m impressed, how exactly does one get the FBI under their belt so well?”

Will twitched to the side as if about to turn to Hannibal. Hannibal opened his mouth to warn him, but it was too late. Tobias noticed the distraction.

Tobias lashed out and whipped Will’s knuckles with a *crack*. The gun clattered to the floor and Will jumped back with a breathy noise of pain, weaponless, before the string could strike again.

Will nearly bumped into Hannibal. “Will! Take this.” Hannibal held out the bloody dagger handle first.

He took it.

Will lunged faster than Hannibal ever imagined he would. Surely they wouldn’t teach someone to blindly rush a perpetrator with a longer-reaching weapon in the academy, which is how he knew this was entirely Will, righteous fury and determination. Will didn’t stop even as the string caught him in the shoulder and sent his balance off-kilter. Mid-fall he still managed to plunge the dagger into Tobias’ stomach and take the man down with him.

Before Tobias had time to gasp, Will pulled the dagger out and stabbed him again, just to the left while Hannibal stood, enraptured at the sight and blinking through the blood on his face so he wouldn’t miss a second.

Tearing the knife out again with a splash of blood, Will grunted with one final hit and rammed the dagger right into his heart.

He kept his white-knuckled grip on the knife, eyes flickering around Tobias’ surprised face as life faded from his eyes. Exquisite. Will’s fury reverberated through the blade and even Hannibal felt its power.

Hannibal approached him carefully, and then gently touched the back of his shoulder. Will startled at his grasp, but relaxed when he turned to find Hannibal. He grabbed Will by the back of each arm, gentler on the one that had taken a hit, and pulled him away from the body.

“He’s dead, Will. C'mere.”

Will left the knife sticking out of Tobias’ chest like a staked flag, and Tobias’ eyes stared blankly toward the heavens. Hannibal felt beyond victorious at what he had wrought this day. He had been right to test Will in this way; there was nothing he would not prevail in, above and beyond all of Hannibal's expectations, and it was a reminder he'd needed. This was Will's power in every world.

Will stumbled across the room in Hannibal’s arms until they sat on the chaise lounger. Hannibal tilted his head to look at the wound on his head, but Will jerked away.

“I need to call an ambulance…” he turned back to Hannibal and cringed. “Shit, you're bleeding a lot, Hannibal.”

There was a pain radiating to the back of his eye like he'd never felt before, but he did his best to push it to the back of his mind, compartmentalizing the ache and all that it might mean for him physically.

Will pushed himself up and hurried to grab the landline on Hannibal's desk. Hannibal followed close behind, determined in his goal to assess Will's injuries. Will didn't jerk away this time as Hannibal pushed back his hair and squinted at the wound while he talked into the phone. Will must have neglected to call emergency services and hurried to Hannibal's with only himself and his rage. Hannibal was beyond proud of those instincts.

Will spoke in short, terse syllables and then hung up on the operator. He was trembling all over. Hannibal grabbed his face to pull his attention back to him.

"Stay with me."

"I'm here, I'm here," he muttered.

"When he first showed up alone, I was so worried for you," Hannibal said. It was the truth, but he also knew he needed to soothe whatever other thoughts had been put into Will's mind by Tobias, and fast. He tried to maintain his air of worry, even though he was feeling mostly euphoric over Will's victory, no matter the consequences he knew this fight may bring.

Will offered him a slight smile. Perhaps not all was lost. He turned his attention to the abrasions on Will's arms next. The cuts were numerous and would darken into aching contusions, but none looked deep enough to require stitches.

"Your eye," Will said. "We need to put pressure on it."

"Yes, but first sit down. Are you feeling dizzy?" Hannibal pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and pressed it to the cut over his eye.

"I'm fine," he said, lifting up on his toes so he could sit back on the desk. He took the handkerchief from Hannibal and pressed it with a firm palm to Hannibal's eye, holding the back of his head with the other arm. "The pressure okay?"

"Yes, however, *your* hands are injured."

Will ignored him. "Ambulance should be soon."

Hannibal wanted to discuss more things before anyone showed up to interrupt them, when Will's adrenaline would recede into anxiety and he wouldn't be so certain about what had occurred.

"How did you know to come here for me?" Hannibal asked.

"Call it intuition. Who's the other body?"

"My patient, the one who knew Tobias. Tobias came here to kill him."

Will expression made it clear he'd said the wrong thing.

“Why don’t you tell me how you really know Tobias? No doctor-patient confidentiality bullshit, how *you* know him.”

Hannibal put his hands up, feeling the ache around his forearm. “A lie of omission, but only so as to avoid over-complication. You’ll find it doesn’t make much of a difference. Tobias kissed me, and then I stopped it and bid him goodbye. Perhaps not as firmly as I should have. He seemed to have come to the impression that I could understand him; that I was the same.”

Will’s hand pressed a little too hard on his eye, but Hannibal didn’t say anything. “What exactly would give him that idea? And why were you with him anyway? Do your appointments usually include dinner and a kiss goodbye?”

It was hard not to be delighted at the origin of Will’s anger. It seemed less a matter of paranoia and more jealousy.

Will’s grip lessened, if only slightly. “I’m not going to make an idiot of myself by saying we were supposed to be exclusive because we weren’t that, but you have to see what this looks like, right? What about whatever it was your patient said?”

Hannibal decided that a bit of difficult truth could help Will to trust him again. He dipped his head in a mimic of shame. “It was actually the reason I reached out to him, and the reason I may have suggested some things I shouldn’t have. I had an appointment, yes, but I was also curious.”

Will's eyes flashed. “You see a violent man and let him into your house instead of turning him in and for what, spontaneous fieldwork?”

“I admit to being overly curious, even to a fault at times, but I never would have put myself into the situation if I didn’t think I could handle it.”

Will gestured with his chin to Hannibal’s eye. “Clearly you couldn’t handle it,” he said.

“I made a misjudgment. If I thought he was that much of a risk, I would have warned you before. I would not have allowed you to face such danger,” he lied.

Will’s voice was softer when he spoke next, tilting his head amiably toward Hannibal. “It’s not about that. I went with two agents, but after I stepped out for a second it was too late for them. There’s not much we could have done anyway without real evidence.”

“What’s important now is that you caught him and that none of our injuries are fatal. If you hadn’t come when you did, I can’t say it would have turned out the same.”

Will kissed him, briefly and softly, and pulled back to adjust the handkerchief. A bit of Hannibal's blood had splotched onto his cheek.

“I was worried too. I came to not knowing if it would be too late. Knowing I brought you into this world in the first place.”

“I got here on my own,” Hannibal said easily, caught in a past dream. “And I always would have followed you in; I have no intention of leaving now. Not when the company is so

agreeable."

Will's answering smile was weak yet hopeful. Hannibal held his gaze for as long as Will allowed him to.

There were footsteps at the front. The paramedics had arrived. Will looked back at him with wide eyes.

"I used excessive force. Again," Will whispered. "I… oh hell, look at him. He's brutalized."

"Shh. Self-defence, with me as your witness. It took a lot to take him down, yes?"

Will nodded, and the paramedics approached.

Hannibal was rushed by ambulance to Johns Hopkins. The ophthalmologist assessed him right away, quickly declaring that the laceration was more than superficial and cut through the sclera, which would likely result in decreased vision if any left at all. Hannibal underwent a CT scan and then the doctors put him under for surgery to salvage what they could.

When he woke, foggy under the influence of anaesthesia, it was with a protective shield taped over his eye and Will by his side.

The bandages lining his skin under his usual clothes suggested he'd been discharged already. He slumped in a chair to the side with his chin against his chest. Hannibal cleared his throat and Will blinked awake.

"It seems I missed my chance to tend to your injuries myself," he said through his dry throat.

Will softened. "Wanting to play doctor with me? No, there was more than enough to fix up with you."

"I assume it all went well?"

"They assure me you still have an eye under there, functionality still pending."

"Good. I'd hate for Tobias to take anything more from me."

Will lifted a hand, hesitated for a moment with it in the air, then let it clap down on Hannibal's hand. His lips pressed into a hard smile, the one that looked more like a grimace if you didn't know him. His expression was weary and it was difficult to tell if it was from the stressful experience they'd endured or if his symptoms had returned.

Will nodded to his other side. "Did you realize you broke your hand too?"

Hannibal lifted his other hand to find it bandaged.

His smile was teasing. “I feel I should compliment you for the sheer power behind that hit, but I also think I have an obligation to teach you the right way to throw a punch now.”

Hannibal considered telling Will he knew how to throw a punch without injuring himself and merely disregarded the knowledge in the heat of the moment, but he was curious to see the off-chance that Will might not be joking. Besides, it may be in his favour that Will considered him so harmless that he didn’t know how to fight. He still wasn't certain what Will would take from Tobias' declarations, especially if he'd already been suspicious. Will didn't show any indication of paranoia now.

“And the case? How did Jack take it?”

Will tensed his jaw. “Seems I’m likely to be up for another medal. It’s vulgar.”

“The justice you wrought was not the kind of justice the FBI claims to uphold, but arguably a more effective kind of justice.”

Will furrowed his eyebrows. “I stabbed him senselessly."

Hannibal had the sense it was less an argument to say it aloud than it was a reminder to himself about what he’d done.

“So did I.”

Will’s voice lowered to a whisper. “I think we both know I didn’t need to kill him at that point.”

“Need, no. But want?”

He shook his head. “Heat of the moment is a shameful thing to get caught up in as a trained agent. I could have put Tobias to rot in jail instead. He could have been a case study for an entirely new killer.”

“I care very little about Tobias’ end nor what the institution lost. Did you feel the same sense of power as you did when you killed Garret Jacob Hobbs?”

Will avoided his gaze. “Perhaps you should stick to playing a different kind of doctor than psychiatrist. At least not my psychiatrist.”

Hannibal wondered if he pushed too far too soon. If Will really did suspect him—and Tobias’ comments couldn’t have helped—then it was dangerous to push. He’d been hasty and reckless.

“Apologies. This medication may have lowered my inhibitions.”

Will nodded. “You should rest. I’ll get you some water and see if there’s anything halfway acceptable to eat here.”

Will pulled his hand away and left him alone.

Acceptance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Following his stay in hospital, Hannibal had to make a statement. “For the books,” Jack said apologetically as he took his side of the story. Hannibal painted Will in the best light he realistically could.

“Will is modest, isn’t he?” he said. “But I don’t think I’d be here today if it wasn’t for him.”

Jack softened, losing the serious air of his professionalism.

“It’s unfortunate that it came to this, and even more unfortunate that it had to be you and Graham involved again,” Jack said. “I truly believe you’ve helped Will stay on his feet since Hobbs. I hope you can continue to be there for him.”

Jack shared a look with Hannibal, something that said *take care of it*, because Jack was the kind of man that wanted trauma dealt with and pushed to the side for the next case. Hannibal kindly agreed and took his leave.

He was only a few steps out of the room when he ran into a stainless steel garbage bin, banging his hip into the corner and nearly doubling over.

“Dr. Lecter!” Jack stepped out after him. “Can I call someone to walk you out?”

“No, Jack. It’s fine,” he said bashfully, straightening up and brushing off his suit. He ignored the other agents in the hallway with a resolute gaze at the door.

He walked more carefully after that, turning his head further to ensure there were no obstacles in his way. He knew the limitations that came with monocular vision, from decreased field of vision to impaired depth perception, but it was turning out more difficult to adapt to than he expected. Sight was never the sense he relied on most, but it was still a significant one. He would need to train his remaining eye to be in charge of the entirety of his vision while he still had the bandage on, and perhaps longer, pending the results of his recovery. It bothered him to have gained such a handicap from a fight he should have been in control of. It would not happen again. He would be no more vulnerable than he'd ever been in either world.

It was the time that any normal man should rest. He was on rounds of painkillers and antibiotics that didn’t make his day-to-day activities easy, but neither could he quiet his mind anymore, not after facing that fear of losing everything. Again.

Thus, he visited the one person he’d ignored for far too long.

“Abigail,” he greeted, assessing the messiness of her Port Haven room. “I apologize that it’s been so long.”

Abigail glanced up at him from under her eyelashes while she doodled in her daily journal. In his experience, teenagers could be masterful at holding grudges. Their brand of angst made it hard not to assume everyone was against them, that a period of neglect was anything but a period of malicious, unforgivable neglect.

Hannibal had neglected Abigail. It was such a meagre slight in comparison.

“I may have an excuse for the last few days with a visible injury to show for it, but not for the weeks preceding,” he continued.

Her pen stopped.

“I wouldn’t want to be here either,” she said flatly.

“No, and who does? Come, let me take you back to mine for a meal.”

He could see she was warring between her pettiness and the chance of escape for just a little while. In the end, she stood up and followed him.

“Are you going to get a pirate patch when that thing comes off?” she asked.

“I will not hide the scar from the world.”

Hannibal reached over her shoulder and twiddled with the arm of her scarf wrapped tight around her throat, the one that covered her own scar.

“Maybe you’ll see it’s a lot less cool to get asked about it all the time,” she grumbled.

He kept his arm around her to pull her in affectionately as he led her to his Bentley. It also wasn’t so hard to love teenagers again.

“That’s why you work on not caring what other people think. Those people don’t matter.”

She frowned in a way that he thought meant, ‘easier said than done,’ but she probably knew by now not to try and debate him.

It was strange to revert back to this place of innocence when he knew how it felt to slice her neck clean open. He was sinless and mostly blameless here—undeserved, but given to him anyway. He could handle the entirely petty reasons she was angry at him. He could make an effort to see their little approximation of a family come together again.

He was surprised to pull up behind Will’s Volvo in front of his Chandler Square house. As far as he knew, he wasn't to expect Will for a couple more hours.

It was easy to make some less-than-optimistic assumptions about his early arrival from the crooked park job, one tire flattening the grass over the curb in the way Will-the-ever-competent-driver never would.

He left Abigail to take off her coat in the foyer. In his walk through the house, he found the backdoor left open, slush tracked over the hardwood, and a coat abandoned on the floor. At

the end of his search, he found Will in the kitchen, face lit white by the wide open fridge.

“Will?”

Feeling how warm the fridge had gotten, he was certain Will had been standing there for a while. Closing the doors didn’t even make Will flinch. Hannibal pulled up his eyelids and peered in close to his face, then checked his pulse. Will’s skin was clammy, his hair pasted to his forehead with sweat.

“What’s wrong with him?” Abigail asked behind him.

“Will is feeling a little under the weather. Would you set the table?”

“It’s, like, four o’clock in the afternoon.”

“Please, a moment, Abigail.”

She left with her arms across her chest. Finally alone, Hannibal nudged Will to turn. He moved without resistance, only a bit shaky on his feet, until Hannibal could help him into the leather chair in the corner.

Reassured that Will wasn’t going to fall and hurt himself, he kneeled and searched for any reaction in his eyes.

“Will? Can you hear me?”

Will grunted, a noise so brief he almost missed it.

“My name is Hannibal Lecter, you know me. If you are able, try to speak. Tell me your name.”

He made another faint noise. Blinked.

It would be easier if he was alone and could conduct some personal tests, but he imagined Abigail, curious as she was, hadn’t gone far.

The next noise sounded more like Will clearing his throat. His eyes moved with new purpose, landing on Hannibal before squeezing shut. He pressed his hands to his forehead.

“Oh, shit,” he grumbled.

“Is it your head?”

Will nodded.

“Let me get you something for the pain.”

He made to stand, but Will spoke.

“No, I—” he dropped his hands. “I have some… somewhere. I just didn’t want this to happen. I don’t remember coming….”

“Will, you hit your head the other day, remember?”

“No, no, it’s not that. This was happening before.”

He knew very well, but he didn’t need Will panicking about it.

“A concussion can exacerbate previous conditions. Perhaps these plans were too rash.”

“No, no, I wanted to… when is she coming over?” Will’s face screwed up in a wince, trying so hard to remember what he should know.

“Abigail is here. Not to worry, I sent her to another room.”

“Shit.”

He didn’t like seeing Will in this despair. It felt rather obvious all of a sudden—he did not want to see Will struggling under this illness he did not need to have.

A little madness was good for the soul certainly, but there was enough he wanted to toy with in Will’s mind that didn’t need to include a life-threatening autoimmune disease that weakened him by the day. If anything, their confrontation with Tobias had shown him that Will’s life was too precious to risk with this experiment. He needed to take control of this world.

He was still worried about the consequences of Will seeing him for who he was too soon. The evidence of his trek through the house that ended at his fridge suggested he might know more than he was letting on, even if only subconsciously.

Truthfully, he worried that Will was on his trail asleep *and* awake. He would simply have to approach things differently.

The only problem was getting Will the treatment he needed without revealing what he’d known this entire time. Would Will see through Hannibal if he pretended to suddenly have a breakthrough regarding his symptoms? Would he be able to prescribe Will the treatment he needed without him questioning it? He would need to consider the best way forward.

He cupped a hand on Will’s cheek. He truly adored this man, and the extent of it was inconvenient.

“What can I do for you?” Hannibal asked.

Will leaned into his hand as he patted his pockets until one rattled with a pill bottle. He pulled out some aspirin.

“Just give me a few minutes. I’ll come out and find you,” he said. He ducked his eyes down in entirely unwarranted shame. Not for much longer, Hannibal reminded himself.

Hannibal pressed his lips to his forehead and allowed him his space.

He entertained Abigail through the rest of the afternoon by showing her the basics of the harpsichord, adapting from some of her early piano lessons she admitted to having. It would take a long time for her to reach a passable level of playing, but he was satisfied enough with her efforts.

Will joined them after not too long and lingered by his bookshelves, sipping a mug of coffee. It was nice to be together, if a little awkward as they found their places.

Hannibal imagined an equivalent of this day had they gone to Italy together. It seemed a shame that the warm air wasn't pouring through the window of their high apartment with antipasti of *crostini* and salad laid out between them. In this world, they hadn't even come together in truth. Yet.

He realized in the depth of his fantasy that it wasn't even a question that he would give Will Abigail in this world, so long as Will still wanted them to be together in the end. He'd forgiven Will long ago. There were no debts to take.

Could he be happy in this life? With this version of Will? With a bit of evolution on both their parts to come into themselves, he thought he could. He didn't know if the isolation of coming from another world would ever recede entirely, but the feeling of belonging here was stronger than before.

Stagnancy scared him less than it did in the past, even if it wasn't his ideal world. He still had this, and it was something.

Chapter End Notes

a short chapter for today! next one may see a familiar face again…

Replacement

Hannibal spent the next few nights in solitude at his home. His injuries and the medication left him too lethargic to do much of anything, so mostly he contemplated.

When he was alone, the melancholy was even harder to shake.

He could accept that it took time to adapt to new dynamics, and it wasn't nearly as hopeless as it felt. Different, but beautiful in its own way. Something he could perhaps even make resemble what they had before, once he revealed to Will who he was.

He was undressed and in bed by the time midnight struck. He opened his mind and entered that familiar, changed world. His entire life in memories, separated by time and space.

Certain places brought him back so vividly that he felt as though he was in his youth again. Pleasant memories existed as an escape for him, but however pleasant they might have been, he always ended up back in the spaces he shared with Will. They held the harshest reminders and the sweetest comforts.

He searched his memory palace mostly on instinct these days. He was not truly looking for Will as he did his rounds, existing in the same empty places as he had for weeks now. It had become a new routine for him.

This time, something made him pause. Something amidst his palace was different, and in it, there existed the hint of a presence he hadn't felt for many days.

He doubled back and blinked his eyes open. It couldn't be... perhaps his exhaustion was making him confused. Why now, after all this time? He willed himself not to get his hopes too high, but he re-entered his mind palace and followed the call that grew stronger when he reached back.

Hannibal laid down on the left side of Will's little farmhouse bed and he wasn't alone.

He blinked away sudden tears and savoured his presence for a moment. He was *back*.

Will stared at the ceiling instead of him, his expression carefully blank. The room was dark but Will's eyes shimmered with the bit of moonlight through the window. He was rather disheveled and shirtless, modesty hardly protected by a thin sheet. He had undoubtedly been drinking and it imbued the room with a gentle sway like a boat on the ocean, but he wasn't entirely inebriated. He appeared thoughtful.

"At one point I could have conceived of spending years away from you if old grudges necessitated it," Hannibal said. "Now it's hard not to feel like mere weeks stretch on forever."

Will sighed and his mouth quirked up in the slightest smile, a gentle thing.

Hannibal continued fondly, “I suppose my earlier dreams were naive and just that—dreams of how I could possibly have you stay with me in the end.”

As much as he hated to admit it, the world he lived in could never compare to the man lying quietly next to him. His true love was a man he’d grown with and left behind.

“I’d like to say the distance helps,” Will said quietly. “Or that any of our old colleagues are right in saying I just need some time. They say it all very sympathetically, but by their impatience, I don’t know if any of them really believe it.”

“People are fans of the platitudes that allow them to skirt the difficult things.”

Will hummed. Hannibal sensed something else in the way he refused to look over.

“What is going on in your life that convinced you to return to where you supposedly had to get out of, Will? I have been looking for you day in and day out and found no trace of you.”

Will smiled, coming about halfway to a self-deprecating chuckle. “I don’t know if I’d go as far as to say anything convinced me. I don’t really recall choosing to come here, and then suddenly you were next to me. It’s not who I expected to look over and see.”

Hannibal stiffened at that. “Meet someone new?” he asked carefully.

“I rambled about all of my dogs like an idiot when we met and she didn’t even get bored. That’s gotta be my soulmate, right?”

Hannibal bristled. “I would listen to you talk about them too if either of us knew that was all you needed,” he said. He couldn’t help the feeling of betrayal that was quickly worming up his throat. Will had not only left him, but deigned to try to move on so soon. He discounted their inescapable bond again and again.

“It’s more than I need, actually. I’m tired, Hannibal, and I don’t need a dead guy to tell me what I need in my life.”

“If you tell it to yourself enough does it become true? Or do you truly not feel how alive I am here next to you?”

“I’m not living in my mind!” he snapped. “I need to move past this shit.”

Hannibal felt suddenly naive to not recognize the source of Will’s dishevelment before, the peculiar afterglow of his rosy cheeks.

“She’s sleeping next to you now.”

Will gulped. “Yes. We had a few good dates and I brought her home, like any normal person. I’m sure you’ll have lots to say about it.”

“Only on how fast you move on.”

“That’s rich. I should have known you’d be a jealous type, even when you already have another one of me around to play with. We weren’t even—no, forget it. You just don’t understand.”

“Nothing and nobody could replace you, Will. I know it’s the same for you too.”

“There’s something to be said for your egotism.”

“You continue to deny—”

“Just stop, please. This was a mistake. You can’t let me have one good night, can you?”

“I followed your call, Will. Perhaps you should consider why you ended up here after having sex with some woman.”

“Fuck *off*!”

The bed flipped upward and the room dissolved around Hannibal in a flash of chaos. The shock sent him sitting upright in his own bed, blinking at his reality separate from Will’s tantrum inside his mind.

He did not try to re-enter, reeling from their short-lived reunion. He leapt off the bed and grabbed only the most necessary of sleepwear to not get him arrested for public indecency before stalking down the stairs and out to his car, pulling on his overcoat as he went.

The stubborn, irascible boy. He refused time and time again to see what they had—what they *could* have if only they came together in truth. He held onto a mirage of normalcy to the grievances of both of them, refusing to admit the beautiful potential of their joining minds. They had triumphed over every obstacle, even miraculously coming together in the face of Hannibal’s untimely death, but still he could not see it—*would* not see it.

The drive to Wolf Trap would take an hour. An hour was long enough to change his mind, he thought. An hour would be enough for his sudden adrenaline to dissipate and his possessive mind to clear. It was more than enough time for a focused, rational creature like him to make a good decision.

For now, all he could think about was the pitiful sting of being rejected again. He would not stand by while Will threw away all they had, only to lose himself to repression and drink. Finding distraction in strangers because he felt like he should. He would cut his own life pathetically short, *wasted*, far away from Hannibal.

He drove on, cutting down the hour drive as he heeded the speed limit less and less. He was approaching Will’s little farmhouse and still he had not turned around.

Hannibal was starting to suspect he was completely serious about what he was going to do.

He pulled onto the long drive leading up to Will’s little farmhouse. If Will was already awake in a bout of insomnia, he would be seeing the shine of Hannibal’s headlights through his curtains right about now. A bit closer and the sound of crunching ice and gravel would wake the dogs. Hannibal had arrived and there was no turning back.

He embraced the buzzing under his skin and let his newfound energy pull him to the front door. He knocked insistently.

A few dogs barked. No lights turned on. He imagined Will creeping silently closer to get a peak at whoever had intruded on his land at this hour to decide if he needed his shotgun or not. The door opened quickly when it did.

“Hannibal?”

Will appeared in the doorway clad in his white t-shirt and short boxer shorts, rubbing at his eye while keeping the dogs back from the doorway with his other hand. It was clear Hannibal had woken him up.

He didn’t want to explain anything, he simply *wanted.* It took one long stride to enter Will’s space and he brought their mouths together immediately, clutching at Will’s face so he couldn’t pull back. He kicked the door closed behind him, not stopping on his route to the bed.

“*Mm!*”

Will stumbled, doing little to reciprocate in his surprise. Hannibal held tight to keep him up and licked inside his mouth to try to elicit a little more from him. He navigated to Will’s bed and pushed him down.

Will bounced when he met the mattress and huffed. Hannibal descended upon him and Will grabbed the sleeves of his overcoat to pull him in close.

Elation bloomed in his chest. Acceptance. Victory.

Hannibal pushed his shirt and boxers out of the way, not caring when he felt the fabric stretch to tearing where it got caught on Will’s limbs. Will helped push off his overcoat and kicked everything to the floor, keeping up with Hannibal’s haste.

“Not that I’m complaining, but where the hell did *this* come from?” Will asked, turning his head to look at his analog clock. Hannibal yanked his head back with a hand on his jaw and descended upon his mouth again.

“*Shh*,” he said against his lips, inadvertently clacking their teeth together. He dragged his hands all over Will’s body with a new insistence, grabbing with the intention of making him ache later. Moving his limbs where he wanted, he nudged his body between Will’s legs and ground down roughly, feeling Will’s hips twitch up against him. He refused to halt for a moment, his hands navigating lower and lower toward unexplored territory. Warm, damp skin, the entirely unfettered musk of Will. He whispered against his neck in a way that could not be misconstrued, “*Will.*”

Will sucked in a sharp breath, instinctively twisting away from Hannibal’s hand guiding down the crevice of his ass. An arm reached up to grasp Hannibal’s shoulder. “Hey, you know this is… quite new for me, right?”

“Trust me,” he whispered, grabbing his hip to hold him still. “Trust me, Will.”

Will was still for a moment as his eyes searched Hannibal’s, and then his voice quickly took on a determined, if quiet, certainty. “Okay. Yeah, all right.”

It was enough for Hannibal.

He followed Will’s vague wave to the side and gathered an opened lube and condoms from his drawer. Another time he could take his time with Will, he decided, grabbing his backside and guiding him to spread his legs. He urged him to relax, whispering encouragement into his ear as he nudged so close there was no room left between them.

He blindly squeezed some lube onto his fingers and tossed the bottle aside, reaching between Will’s legs and feeling him flinch and clench at the cold fluid. Hannibal pushed on until he relaxed enough to feel the tightness of his rim. Finding Will’s lips again, he kissed him until his body released some of its tension, licking into his mouth without a care for grace. His eye ached at the pressure and he could only hold himself up with his broken hand, but it was no bother compared to what else he was aching for.

Hannibal pressed inside slowly with one finger. Will clenched around him almost painfully, sucking in a sharp breath. He massaged deeper, his knuckle twisting inside until Will opened for him, just slow enough for Will to adjust.

“Good, good…” he said, boring in another finger next to his first.

Will’s back arched abruptly and his legs curled up at Hannibal’s hip as if he was about to knee Hannibal away. “Slow, slow,” he pleaded, breathing heavier.

“Hold onto me, you’re good,” Hannibal muttered encouragingly, pressing his weight down onto Will so he could use his other hand to wrap Will’s leg around his back. He crooked his fingers inside him, seeking the gland that made him twitch so sweetly. Will’s grip tightened on him, legs at his waist and hands clutching onto his shoulders.

He could hear the dogs settling down in the living room. Will’s sheets were pungent with fever sweat. The air was brisk near his cracked window. It was all so starkly real compared to the fantasy he had been considering on the road over. Will was so responsive that there was no mistaking this moment for a dream, but it was happening in the entirely wrong world. It was unfortunate that it had to come to this.

“I’m going to fuck you now,” he told Will, propping himself back up on his elbow. Will held on tight, not allowing him to move back much further. Hannibal could practically hear the buzzing of his mind as he prepared himself for what was next.

He delicately removed his fingers and worked a slick condom on himself with efficiency, pausing only to rip off the remainder of his clothing. He watched Will’s face for signs of trepidation, but he realized that even if those nerves were present, there was desire there too in the glaze of his eyes. He recognized that some part of Will just wanted to please Hannibal, but he hoped the desire could help him if one day he needed to ask for forgiveness for this moment.

Hannibal returned his fingers inside him, curling in a third knuckle and searching for Will's pleasure past his nervousness. Will enveloped him with less tension than before, though it still took great effort to press in. He was as ready as Hannibal could bear.

He shuffled forward and took a moment to appreciate the sight of his cock pressed up under Will's balls. He mentally measured himself against where he would soon breach. His preferred world or not, there was little difference in how Hannibal's body responded to the sight below him, the beauty and flush that had existed solely in his mind for so long. He wished they'd opted for no condom so he could drip down Will's perineum, tracing his path. He nestled closer between Will's cheeks until he felt the give of his flesh. Will sucked in a long breath, sounding much like he had when he'd been in distress in their past life, but with an edge to it that was entirely novel.

He pushed in slowly but ceaselessly until he was most of the way inside. Will clenched his eyes shut and panted in long gasping breaths, sounding nearly on the edge of sobbing.

He cupped Will's face tenderly. "Trust me," he repeated.

Will nodded, blowing out a lungful of air. All around and under Hannibal, Will relaxed into him. Hannibal ground deeper, pressing their bodies together until they were seamless. He stilled himself at the cusp of desire and watched for Will's reaction.

Will nodded more insistently. "Go," he whispered, tightening his grip around Hannibal.

Hannibal didn't give it a second thought, jerking forward where he could fit no more and then dragging back out again. He rolled his hips in the choppy way he was aching to before slowly harnessing a rhythm that would be more pleasurable for them both. He felt Will lose the tension he was holding and accept the intrusion inside without as much resistance. They had surpassed this boundary and moved together as one.

As he built up a steady pace and his world dissolved into one of instinctive pleasure and desire, Hannibal allowed himself to slip away. When he stepped into his memory palace, something clicked for him, wrapped up in Will's essence. He *felt* him. He moved as if on autopilot as he drifted away inside of himself, only partially aware of how he existed on top of Will. He reached out to Will from beyond this space they'd made for each other and called for him, pulled him in. His electric, infuriating presence quickly grew strong enough to feel corporeal. Will was here, at his demand. Hannibal did not say a word.

He was in two places at once. Will's little farmhouse bed overlapped itself as if in different lenses, one of him squirming below and the other standing by the bed, completely silent but for the slightest breath of air that escaped him.

Hannibal did not allow himself to look to the side, as much as he wished to. He kept his eyes on the man beneath him as he bent Will in half and pressed him deeper into the sheets. He swallowed every one of his breaths and indulged in the knowledge of indignant eyes on him. *See me,* he wanted to say. *Let there be no question.*

In his mind, the world pulsed in red hues, and in his world, the headboard banged against the wall in time. He fucked Will harder to hear the cracking beat. One hand twined in his hair on

the back of his head and he half expected to be yanked back, but he was drawn in instead. Will locked his legs around his back and made a noise he'd never heard from him before.

Hannibal didn't like to live with regrets, but he didn't think it was even possible to regret this momentary satisfaction. Even the rage and confusion of Will swirling around him—that weighted silence that could only signal just how indignant he felt—wasn't enough to make him hesitate. Will's emotions pumped into him so readily he wondered if it was a bit like what Will experienced day by day.

Betrayal. Possessiveness. Desire.

That familiar voice echoed from somewhere distant, a whisper projected through from some other world.

"Molly, wake up?"

Hannibal faltered in his movements, stuttering his hips against Will's skin with a weak slapping noise. Will hand squeezed the back of Hannibal's neck encouragingly.

"Hannibal?"

That same whisper carried through, so pointed he almost could have been certain it was directed at him: *"I want you."*

It clearly fell upon someone else's ears. Hannibal picked up the pace again, fucking Will like he meant it and ignoring the eyes searching for him from within his arms. His mind was a mind-numbing swirl of lust and despair and he could do nothing but snap his hips forward in time to the slow-building rhythm he sensed in his mind.

The same rhythm as Will, starting to fuck the woman he brought home to his bed.

He pulled out all the way and rolled Will over to his stomach. Hannibal was barely present and he couldn't let Will see that, clutching at his shoulders like he was trying to keep Hannibal from floating away. He tugged his hips back and entered him quickly, getting one hand beneath him to touch him. Will grunted at his manhandling, but the noise felt just as far away as the man in his mind.

Was *Molly* enveloped in this same musk? No, Will smelled different when he wasn't sick. He had a new smell after, one Hannibal had to concentrate to remember, but when he did he almost felt like he could taste it. He latched his mouth onto the back of Will's neck and ground the head of his cock into the walls of Will's insides for an amount of time he could not keep track of, trying so desperately to hold onto each world in their entirety. Will pulsed all around him, *alive*. He couldn't remember ever wanting someone so badly.

"Ha—I'm…"

He wasn't exactly sure where the voice was coming from until it combined with a shaking body beneath him and spilling wetness over his hand.

Hannibal couldn't bring himself to slow down, not when the image beside him grew clearer and clearer, *his* Will, grinding down into a slim, feminine body, blonde hair tangled against the sheets. They moved in pace and it was almost like Hannibal was fucking him—almost, but not quite.

He propped his chin up on the curly head of hair beneath him so he could watch the couple next to him. It was startlingly vivid. Will slowly turned his head and met his eyes, wide and glassy, twitching with every motion he made gyrating his body forward against the woman.

"Hannibal…"

"Hm?"

He was stewing on how it could be that Will's mouth didn't move at all, and at the strange flicker of recognition beside him, when he heard a noise of pain below him. "Hannibal," Will repeated, reaching a hand back to clutch Hannibal's hip.

Hannibal stopped thrusting forward and buried his face in Will's neck, returning his attention that he'd been so careless in forgetting. He dipped his face closer to the bed, hiding from the eyes on him.

He sensed a quiet shame in Will's voice that made his heart pang. "It's, ah—I'm sensitive. Let me… I can use my mouth."

"Oh," he breathed into his ear. He kissed the side of his face and pulled out gently. "I'm sorry, dear."

He was surprised, of all the moments of the night, to feel his mind palace pulse with more energy than he'd ever felt before. There was no denying the rage it elicited, so potent that he felt himself fly back into reality entirely, kicked from his own palace.

He struggled to control his breathing, reeling from the world that had opened to him in ways he'd never experienced before. He slipped to the side and pulled Will in so his backside was against Hannibal and he couldn't see Hannibal's unease.

Will was reaching back between his legs but Hannibal couldn't escape the pang he felt at the idea of finishing after what he'd done. He grabbed Will's wrist before he could start.

"It's okay," he said, shaking his head and kissing Will's neck with intent to distract. "I'm satisfied, I assure you."

Will went still in his arms. Words weren't needed to see his wariness.

"It was good. You're good," Hannibal reassured, hoping his voice didn't feel as strained as he felt. "Apologies for my less-than-tasteful entrance. I just wanted you."

"Hannibal. Are you all right?" Will asked, attempting to twist back and see him.

It was clear he hadn't soothed Will's insecurities, so he pulled him tighter, keeping him locked in place. Hannibal pulled his condom off and disposed of it without letting him go.

“Of course. I interrupted at such a rude hour. Sleep with me, please. I’m here,” he said as convincingly as he could. He was certain he wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight. Not with that echo he could still sense from beyond.

He worried Will wouldn’t stop pushing. In his other world, he thought Will would have been relentless. It took a long minute, but Will finally settled down in his arms. Hannibal could tell he was not asleep either, but they continued to lay next to each other.

Carefully silent, wary to maintain their perfect stillness, he held himself back in his mind so he couldn’t slip into his other world and see what reaction he may have garnered that he worried wouldn’t be so easily soothed.

Apologies

Hannibal awoke to find he'd not only fallen asleep in the night, but that Will had left without waking him. Hannibal had exerted extreme control even over his sleep since medical school, never requiring alarms and becoming alert at any movement around him. His sedating medication must have rendered him unaware.

He sat up bashfully, taking in his surroundings through one heavy eye as he recalled the previous night. Will was nowhere to be found, but the smell of coffee wafted through the house. The dogs were gone and there was an empty spot on Will's shoe rack. He flipped the covers back.

He found his night clothes draped over one of the chairs. He stopped in the washroom to splash some water over his face and check his eye, which ached a worrying amount, then poured himself a mug of coffee. Printed on the mug, whole, was the familiar script, *I'd rather be fishing.*

As he expected, he found Will on the front porch, leaning on the railing in the cold. He didn't turn when Hannibal came out, nor when he stepped next to him.

He watched the dogs run around with Will for a few minutes until he could be certain that Will was stewing in anger and there wasn't a more mundane reason for his silence. He couldn't fault him for it, not after what he'd done. The Will in his mind may have earned his ire, but the man next to him had done nothing at all.

"I try to use apologies sparingly so I can retain their power, but Will, there is no question that I acted rash and ungracious last night."

Will shook his head and turned the other way to hide his face entirely.

He tried for concern. "Are you hurt?"

Will scoffed. Hannibal bristled.

"Then perhaps it is not an apology that you require."

Will sighed. "I don't know if I should be more angry or insulted by you acting dumb. I know when you're not really with me."

"I'm afraid my medication made it so—"

"I imagine you will always have a very charming excuse. I don't appreciate lies, Hannibal."

He nodded, trying to exude understanding, though he was admittedly tired of rehashing this same argument.

“I didn’t lie last night,” he said, then reached out to stroke Will’s cheek with his knuckles. “It *was* good.”

“*Very* charming,” Will spit, turning to walk away.

Hannibal lunged into action before he could think too hard about it. He pushed Will into the siding, pinning him by one wrist and one shoulder. Will shoved against him, but Hannibal pushed right back. It was a gamble, but he’d had his suspicions about what angered Will and what didn’t bother him nearly as much as it perhaps should have.

“Am I to understand it wasn’t my roughness you didn’t appreciate?” he asked, fighting to keep his grip.

Will was exceedingly strong and might have been able to buck Hannibal off if he really put his all into it, but he resorted to simply glaring at Hannibal, putting up only the illusion of a fight.

“It wasn’t particularly appreciated,” he said through grit teeth, yanking his arm free.

“No? It didn’t seem to impede your pleasure,” he said. If he was wrong, then Will might resent him indefinitely for the slight. If he was correct in his assumptions, it just might distract Will enough for them to move past this.

Will’s eyes were pinpoints of fury. Hannibal ignored it and lurched forward to kiss him, fighting through teeth to get to where he could taste Will. He pressed forward to pin Will with his chest as he reached downward to get at his boxer shorts.

Before he could push them down, Will pushed him away hard enough to knock the air from his lungs. He caught himself on the porch railing, knocking their balanced mugs off the back. Will didn’t seem to care, he was right back on Hannibal and yanking down the clothes he’d just put on, still moving with the jerky movements of a fight. He dropped to his knees right on the cold, hard porch.

Of course, Will needed confirmation of what he could give back to Hannibal. It was no burden for Hannibal to have his cock surrounded in the warmth of his mouth. His head fell back.

“*Oh,* Will.”

Will exuded confidence so much that Hannibal hadn’t ever realized just how insecure the man could be. It was illogical in his mind. No one could compare to Will. Except for his other self, perhaps. The pang he got at imagining entering his mind palace later came with a complicated mix of excitement and dread.

He kept his attention centred on the man before him; he owed that much to Will. He slid his hand in the back of his hair and slowly and indulgently rocked his hips forward to help him. Will wasn’t taking him too deep, but he was trying and Hannibal had no doubt that he’d be a quick study as with everything else in his life. Looking down, the sight of Will’s mouth stretched around his cock was more than pleasing.

He focused on the temperature difference between the cold morning air and Will's hot mouth, somehow making him feel more sensitive and peaking his nipples. Will's cheeks were pink, whether from the cold or the indignity of using his mouth on another man, though Hannibal imagined that Will would deny any shame. He was a masterclass in shame and also in pushing it to the side. There was no doubt he was putting his all into it, bobbing his head and keeping his lips sealed around him.

Will's nails dug into the skin on his hip with, if Hannibal wasn't mistaken, clear intention to make it hurt. Hannibal twitched as Will dug through layers of his skin. He allowed his pleasure to build quickly and freely without holding back, made easy by Will's efforts. He was breathless within a couple of minutes.

"Will," he gasped, tapping on his cheek.

Will pulled off and stroked him with his hand, looking up at Hannibal with unbearably enticing eyes. His charm was effortless, and clearly unintentional as he searched Hannibal's expression. The knowledge of his attention and perception was enough to send Hannibal over the edge, spilling into his hand. One spurt reached the side of Will's pink cheek.

Hannibal grabbed Will before he could move to wipe it away, and pulled him up so he could kiss the mess, licking his lips clean. Will breathed heavily against him, leaning in as if magnetized.

Will grabbed the side of his neck with his clean hand, shaking Hannibal briefly and insistently.

"Fucking bastard. You're lucky I feel the way I do about you," he said. Hannibal knew he was talking about much more than their budding sexual dynamic.

"I am aware." He pulled up his pants, ignoring the uncomfortable moistness.

"I know what pulls you away in your mind. Don't make me compete with something like that again," he said firmly.

Hannibal set his hand on Will's cheek. "Nothing will come between us, no matter how I may slip. I am truly sorry you feel that way, Will."

Will frowned at him. True forgiveness would likely take time, Hannibal expected.

"I believe the best repentance is made through gifts," he said, determined to help things along. "Let me make you breakfast."

Will hesitated but whistled for his dogs and followed him inside, shoulders slumped into reluctant surrender.

After he returned home and took his medication, Hannibal lit the fire in his mind's office.

He wasn't sure if what he felt was regret. He was entirely aware that what he'd done was in bad taste, but it had also been *exhilarating*.

Vindictive. Necessary.

He was no longer regretful about where he was with the Will in this world, who he was certain would soften with time. The Will in his mind was more complicated.

He could scrounge up the guilt he knew he should feel, but so too did he feel the rage and betrayal swarming in his veins. He was tired of being pushed to the side, so much so it nearly drowned out everything else. He'd wanted to show Will another piece of his feelings, and he had.

The one thing he refused to do was put things off or allow Will another chance to run from him. No longer would he stand for it.

He called out to Will the way he now knew how. The way he'd drawn Will in last night reassured him that he would not lose him so easily again, though he was certain Will could still make things very difficult for him.

He sat in his usual therapy chair in his mind. He thought it could do them good to be somewhere a little less… personal, though he couldn't deny all the intimate moments that had happened in these very chairs, simply from speaking those difficult truths from the depths of their souls. At least there wasn't a bedroom in sight here, though it wouldn't take much to make it so.

Will arrived suddenly when he did. He sat across from Hannibal, tapping his fingers on the arms of his chair as if he'd been there waiting for this the entire time. Perhaps he had been. He was dressed for the day, and evidently a little tipsy. The smell of cheap beer wafted through the room. Despite his bitterness and disappointment, he couldn't deny that it was a delight as always to see his Will before him.

"Hello, Will." Hannibal crossed his legs. "How was your night?"

Will glared, lowering his chin to look at Hannibal through his eyelashes.

"That was quite the show you put on there, Doctor Lecter."

"Are we no longer on a first-name basis? After all we've been through?"

"I have been thinking that a few more boundaries could be in order."

"Is that truly what you want?" Hannibal asked.

Will leaned forward in his chair. "What you did was uncalled for. For *everyone* involved."

"Are you feeling protective of your other self now?"

“I don’t have his feelings. I went through different things than he did. Makes it easy to feel a little distant, but I can still see how wrong things are here.”

“Then it follows that you can be jealous of your otherworldly brother.”

Will’s glare deepened and he shook his head as if in warning.

“Fuck him all you want—kiss him and be sweet to him if it makes you feel better about yourself,” he seethed. Hannibal didn’t think he was imagining the effort it took him to force the words out steadily.

“But I can see how sick he still is,” he continued. “You gave me real sight into your world, Doctor Lecter, and I saw a lot of things there. Your claim that you’re doing things *better* is nothing but a lie. You’re both injured in ways that never should have happened. I watched you hurt him right in front of my eyes last night. The way you care is no different; your care is still the kind that cuts. That is not what I want. Do not mistake me there.”

Hannibal clutched his armrests and willed himself to stay unperturbed.

“Let’s not lie to ourselves here,” he said smoothly. “We’ve seen far too much to dance around it, don’t you think? It is more than care; it is love. And it is the way you give and receive love, no less.”

Will barely twitched. “Don’t.”

“What I showed you was only one piece of the puzzle. You—”

Will cut him off with a gesture to Hannibal’s eye, asking, “Who hurt you?”

Hannibal could see his efforts to change the subject, but it wouldn’t work. If anything, it only proved how significant this was for Will.

“Things simply got out of control with Tobias Budge, but it was *you* who saved me. As for the diagnosis, I intend to get him the help he needs as soon as I can. It was the care you perhaps deserved. Is it an apology you desire, Will?”

“We are far past apologies and forgiveness.”

“Then tell me, where exactly are we?”

Will went silent. Hannibal witnessed a war across his features as he opened his mouth, closed it, and winced at something Hannibal could not guess. When he finally spoke, he sounded softer than before, despite his glower remaining.

“A stabilized state of bitter resentment and the simple longing for enjoying each other’s company, I suppose.”

Hannibal straightened up, taken aback. Will kept his gaze steady, serious. He refused to admit he wanted Hannibal, but he was almost certainly offering a truce. It was perhaps the closest he’d ever get to Will admitting he missed Hannibal. It was much more than he expected. Did

he dare hope that it was authentic? The elation blooming in his chest left little question of how he would accept it.

He let a smile break out across his face.

“Then I hope we can enjoy each other’s company like we used to, and get our anger out in more mutually beneficial ways.”

Will frowned, and his despair could not have been fabricated. His shoulders dropped slightly as if in defeat. “You know, when you put me in the BHSCI, I found myself acting in strange ways. I’d prop up my legs on the bed to leave a space at the foot. I’d never cross my legs as I sat, even if I felt stiff. I’d lean to one side so I could be closer to the floor. The day I noticed it, it occurred to me that I was leaving space for my dogs. Somewhere in my muscle memory I was beckoning them to lay in my bed, or sit on my lap, or I was reaching down to pet them on the floor. And now I realize I can’t stop leaving a space for you in my life. I keep everyone else at a distance so they don’t take your spot. I have to stop myself from instinctively looking for you here. I wait for Thursday appointments to come, only for nothing to happen.”

Hannibal pushed out of his chair and kneeled on the floor in front of Will. Will didn’t reach back for him, so he rested his hands on the armrests—close, but not touching.

“I searched for you in my palace, afraid of the silence I once lived with,” Hannibal said. “I find you in my world, but it’s never the same. I am simply in a constant state of searching for you.”

Will’s eyes glistened and he blinked against it.

“I won’t stop living my life, but I won’t keep running from you either. I hate to admit it, but I don’t think it did us any good,” Will said. “But it will be on this condition. If you repeat what you did last night again, I will not take it well. Do not test me on this.”

“Boundaries?” Hannibal reached up and cupped Will’s cheek. He felt real, blending into all the memories of touching him before. He lifted up on his knees to look at him face to face, taking in every detail, this Will marred by different scars.

Will flinched before him.

“Don’t you dare kiss me,” he whispered.

Hannibal nearly flinched at the perception, but he recovered himself and maintained their proximity. Testing. He had no intention of pushing such a thing now, as much as he might have liked to. Despite Will’s anger, he could only feel satisfied by the newly opened rooms in their relationship since last night.

“Are you so uncomfortable with the knowledge that you might desire me differently in one world?”

The implication that it was true in this world too went unspoken, remaining Hannibal's quiet satisfaction.

Will leaned in, challenging him back. "I'm aware enough of my feelings, I assure you. If Alana was my clutch for balance, who are you now?"

"Someone who can understand you," Hannibal said, refusing to give into Will's attempt to make him question the relationship. He rose to stand, giving him space. He couldn't push Will too much when things were so fraught. He'd only just gotten him back, and there was his anger to sort through. Fortunately, he had an idea.

"Tell me," Hannibal continued, taking his seat again. "Do you still think about killing me?"

Will looked away, breathing deeply on the offset of their physical proximity. "Ah, old dreams."

"It doesn't have to be simply because Jack took the opportunity away from you. Your imagination is your strength. It could be… therapeutic."

Will chuckled. "You're not slick. This isn't therapy."

Hannibal continued as if he hadn't heard him. "You stabbed me in here last time we saw each other, no consequences. How did you feel?"

Will's eyes flickered down to his throat.

"For a brief moment, powerful. Righteous."

"And then?"

He shrugged, pursing his lips. "And then… disillusioned? I was reminded that none of this is real."

"Perhaps it is not real, but it is *significant*."

"What exactly are you proposing? That I pretend to stab you a few times until I feel all better? I think you underestimate just how broken things are between us."

"Well, you could put a bit more spirit into it. Humour me."

"Do you even convince yourself when you say these things?"

"I did something to you last night that bothered you deeply. That cannot go unanswered. If you are not to run from me again, and if I no longer allow you to run, then you must answer for it in a different way. There are things we can do in this world without consequence that we were never able to before, and we should recognize that power."

Will levelled his gaze. Hannibal thought Will would continue to protest, but then the world around Hannibal changed. They were somewhere else.

It was Hannibal's own dining table before him, a steaming feast laid out. The spread was so real he could almost taste it.

He was no longer moving freely, and he looked down to see rope tying him to the chair. He had no intention of running, but he could appreciate the optics.

By the quick and detailed setting change, Hannibal wondered if this wasn't a new fantasy of Will's.

"Well, is this what you wanted?" Will asked. He sat at the opposite head of the table, face soured in the same bitterness as before. He raised one eyebrow.

"This is about you, Will."

"Not as much as you'd admit, but fine, I'll play. Do you feel pain here?"

Will stood and walked to Hannibal's end. Nicer shoes than he was wearing before tapped along the wooden floors.

"I feel the suggestion of pain. I only need to use my imagination."

Once Will approached him, he stabbed a knife into the back of Hannibal's hand. He didn't flinch as it penetrated the chair's arm and pinned him there. Will walked around the back to his other side and stabbed another knife into his other hand while Hannibal sat, unbothered.

"And is this what you imagined? Some sordid role-play?" Will asked, twirling another knife in his hand.

"It's your fantasy, Will. It's only as sordid as you make it."

He pressed the tip of his knife to Hannibal's throat and paused there.

"It takes some of the fun out of it when it can't be real," he said. "But I guess then I'd only be able to kill you once."

The illusion of pain across his neck felt like he was coming up from sedation and only distantly aware of what was being done to his body. He *wanted* it to hurt. He focused on the sensations as the blade sliced through the skin on his neck, deep enough to hit his carotid artery and jugular vein. If it had been real, he'd be going into hypovolemic shock right now. Instead, he was awake as the entire world tipped forward. The blood wasn't just flowing down his front, it was gushing over the feast laid out in front of him, a tidal wave of red smothering and staining each dish, a river through the sinewy entrees and ghastly skull centrepieces. Will sat again at the other end of the table, the waterfall of red splashing through its final course over him while he waited for it with his eyes wide open.

Hannibal fell forward the way gravity was pulling him and then shot back to the seat of his office chair. Will, clean, sat across from him, watching his every move carefully.

"Well?" Hannibal asked, breathless from the sensations. He pulled his collar away from his throat, feeling for blood that wasn't there.

“It’s something,” Will said, cheeks flushed almost as deep as the blood had been.

Revelation

Hannibal considered acceptance.

Forgiveness was a fickle thing, subject to change at the spark of a memory or an unseen trigger. Hannibal was beginning to consider it something incurable between him and Will, but acceptance—that was something they could give each other unconditionally. The pieces had fallen around him in the most pleasing of ways, in being granted acceptance in each cherished world. It left him nothing short of euphoric throughout the coming days.

Only heightening his good mood, his breakthrough regarding Will's encephalitis diagnosis came only shortly after he visited the bureau with lunch for two and ran into Alana Bloom.

"Are we by any chance on our way to check in on the same man?" he asked, greeting her in the hall.

She smiled good-mannerly, with the secret of her affections close to the surface. "Just in the neighbourhood," she said, falling in step with him.

"My intentions are slightly less concealed," he admitted. "I continue to observe Will on Jack's orders to ensure his mental state on the job, particularly after his second, far more perilous confrontation in the field."

Alana looked worriedly at the bandage on his eye. She had phoned him the other day to express her concern, but he didn't let the call drag out much, citing his fatigue.

"I might have to perch on your other shoulder so to speak, whether that makes me the angel or the demon," she said. He was certain she considered herself the angel in most scenarios, and it was a fitting metaphor if not the most complimentary from his view, but he held back any comment.

"I have issues with what Jack Crawford is asking of Will," she continued. "I don't know if it's good for Will to be in the field, or *you* for that matter."

"It was an unfortunate event, one that may have come to head in my office no matter Will's involvement. I find myself lucky that Will was there, as selfish as that may be."

"Well, for that I'm glad too," she said quickly, turning to him in worry. She was so gentle in this world, seamlessly finding that light wherever she went, and not out of naivety. Her perception had always been rose-coloured but sharp and realistic, in stark contrast to a lot of the other less-interesting companions Hannibal had met. It made Alana Bloom a breath of fresh air. She surrounded herself in darkness and it fell off of her in a rain of petals. Here she was, still utterly determined to find the most optimistic determination of what made Will Graham the man he was. As he recalled from their last world together, she had even identified his encephalitis diagnosis while seeking to explain the alleged actions that landed him in the BHSCI. He held back a smile at the realization.

“It doesn’t mean I’m not worried about his mental state for the same reasons you are,” he said, watching her carefully. “I admit I have been somewhat at a loss.”

She leaned in closer, eager to help.

“I suppose Will is a hard man to define in all matters of life,” he continued. “I’ve been so certain this is a case of mental illness that I now wonder if I was not blinded by my assumptions and missed a physiological cause.”

“I’m happy to be a sounding board if you would like. God knows you’ve been that for me countless times before,” she said.

They approached Will’s lecture hall. Will was nowhere to be found, though his things were scattered across the desk. His usual coffee cup was missing, so they might still have a few minutes alone.

“You see, Will has periods of clarity when he is clearly lucid and aware, then the next moment he’s gone again,” he explained. “Fever, headache, confusion, he even alluded to some recurring hallucinations, though not while I was observing him. It only seems to be worsening, though so does his stress in the field.”

Alana furrowed her eyebrows. “Considering that it might not be mental illness… what disease progresses gradually but plateaus for lengths of time?” she asked, mostly to herself.

Hannibal pretended to see something on Will’s desk and pulled out a sheet of paper. It was a full page of notes in Will’s handwriting about the Chesapeake Ripper, mostly the repeat profile that Hannibal had already heard. His writing was straight and even across the top half before sloping near the bottom into the right-hand corner, lines crowding together and overlapping in places.

He held back a smile. This was exactly the thing that had made the light bulb go off above her head before.

Alana drew in a sharp intake of breath and turned it towards herself. She shared a knowing look with Hannibal.

“Evidence of spacial deficit. This is serious, Hannibal,” she said. “Were you aware of this?”

He shook his head, pinching his lips in thoughtful concern.

Alana began talking faster like she used to as an overly excited student still learning the world.

“It could be some form of encephalitis. It’s hard to diagnose, there are no tumours, no lesions… It wouldn’t even show up on a brain scan unless you were looking for it.”

There was his student. He couldn’t help but smile with pride.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

They turned to see Will standing between the aisle of chairs, glasses on and a steaming cup of coffee in hand.

Hannibal put out a hand to beckon him closer. “Doctor Bloom may have just had a breakthrough, and considering your condition, I think she just might be right. Come, with your permission, we mustn’t waste any time in calling your physician.”

Will’s relief was palpable. He hurried forward, turning toward Alana with a hopeful gaze as he set down his coffee. She was slowly putting the piece of paper away, but it had caught Will’s eye already. She gave in and turned it toward him instead, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. Hannibal bristled, but tried not to let it show.

“You probably know this kind of spacial deficit is a sign of cognitive impairment, but if it is encephalitis, many people will make a full recovery, especially if we’ve caught it early. If not, there is always rehabilitation.”

Will nodded, letting his glasses slide a few millimetres down his nose. “I’ll hold off on the panic until I know, but thank you for the reassurances.”

“I guess I shouldn’t get ahead of myself, huh? It’s just that I can see it’s been hard for you lately. How are you doing Will, really?”

Hannibal knew when he was being excluded from a conversation. He stepped away to phone the office that would give Will the diagnosis he was waiting for and watched them from afar. It was important that Alana’s breakthrough take the attention off of him, but it still didn’t feel good to think of Will associating that relief with her, especially when Will wasn't seeing Hannibal in the best light these days.

He recalled again how, despite who Alana might be in this world, she still owed her life to him. He might delay out of lingering affections, but he would not forget.

He couldn’t help but watch them as he secured Will an expedited appointment, using his camaraderie with the chief physician in his favour. Will was cleaning his glasses on his shirt as he leaned in closer than was necessary to talk to Alana. A moment later, Alana pulled him into a hug. Hannibal looked away.

He hung up the phone and then heard the other voice in his mind.

“Very sneaky, Doctor Lecter. I’m sure Alana is quite excited to see me stable.”

He unwittingly warmed at Will’s voice in his mind. It did little to melt the frustration at the dwindling boundaries between their worlds. Little was private anymore since they’d crossed over into each other’s worlds that first time, but he didn’t mind the overlap of their minds when it meant he got to see Will so freely. His Will, watching the sun go down from his porch, or reading a book by the fire, or calling that woman from the kitchen as he tried his best to seem like his heart was in it. He had the sense that they weren’t that far from each other even while they slept, imbuing his world with a new comfort.

“Do you consider yourself stable in the absence of your neurological condition?” Hannibal asked internally.

“Ouch.”

“Anyone who wasn’t a little mad would bore me. A little madness is medicine against the world, of course.”

“And he doesn’t bore you? He’s not even trying to kill you,” Will said.

“Not yet,” Hannibal said in good humour, trying to focus back on the real world. Will glanced at him from over Alana's shoulder.

"Oh right, he'll soon have a totally clear mind, thanks to our dear Alana."

Hannibal stepped out of his mind and turned his attention back on the pair to avoid replying. There were things he'd need to consider, but he, as always, had full confidence in his ability to handle the situation. He smiled warmly at Will and Alana and informed them of the appointment he'd secured.

Alana agreed to cover Will’s afternoon class so he could go to the doctor, and Hannibal led Will away to have lunch in peace somewhere.

They found a bench to sit on and Will pressed his toe to the side of Hannibal’s shoe. Hannibal raised one eyebrow, noticing his small smile. Evidently, his anger hadn’t lingered for long, or perhaps his medical breakthrough had simply raised his mood enough to forget it for the time being.

“Jealous that I might have a new stand-in doctor?” he asked.

Hannibal busied his hands with opening Will’s tupperware container. Will took the proffered meal with a nudge from his toe.

“Sleeping with one psychiatrist is more than enough for me,” Will mumbled offhandedly. He was clearly taking the piss, but the reassurances below it felt genuine.

“Not particularly,” Hannibal replied. “But perhaps I still want you all to myself.”

Will’s eyes shone for a moment. He ducked down to take a bite of food, but it didn’t hide his smile completely.

“Not a problem,” he said quietly, almost so quiet that Hannibal couldn’t hear.

He sensed something sour, from a faraway place within him, but he pushed it back down as well as he could.

Boundaries

Hannibal awaited Will's medical tests and discussed the familiar results with the doctors, but his mind was elsewhere. Beyond this world and into the next, Will was not alone.

Hannibal was not in his memory palace, merely lingering at the door, one could say. Their new discovery had opened a tunnel to each other's worlds that rendered them never entirely closed off to the other, and if one got close enough, they could make out a few words beyond.

Will was laughing. Will was laughing an uncharacteristic amount, perhaps more than Hannibal had ever heard in such a short time span. A subdued, throaty chuckle that subsided only to return again at every subsequent chatter. Hannibal might be able to explain it away with his intoxication, and intoxicated he was, but Will had been intoxicated with him before. Will was different.

A woman's voice carried through. Hannibal recognized her raspy, bantering affectation from the past days. He sensed Will's low-grade arousal across the space, though he didn't make a move. It almost made it worse to know Will was stretching out their afternoon together rather than just fucking her impersonally and parting ways. It did not feel impersonal.

Hannibal cracked his neck, blinking sightlessly at the MRI scans before him.

Molly—the name he remembered with a bitter taste—was sharing an anecdote of a time she was hit by a baseball at a game and walked out with a goose egg the size of a mango. Alongside her at the time was her son. Better than her having a daughter, he suspected, at least in Will's mind. A safe family just waiting for him to fill the spot, without passing on those horrible genes he feared so much.

It felt superficial. It felt fraudulent. It could not be more apparent, but still Hannibal felt threatened. If nothing else, Will's amusement was true and Hannibal could not even feel relief at his happiness when he had not done it himself.

He would never convince Hannibal of their authenticity, but perhaps the real concern was whether he could convince himself.

Hannibal had spent some time searching for Molly online, but it was hard to narrow her down with the meagre information Will had given. Hannibal considered joining a dating app to ensure he was meeting single and interested women, but he liked to think that Will wouldn't have lowered himself to such a method even if he was desperate. Besides, a lot could change for a middle-aged woman in a couple of years.

It was too difficult to get a proper view of her from his vantage point where Will kept her to himself. Hannibal's mind was cruel in devising the woman he imagined he would pursue.

He was startled out of his cruel imagination by Will's clear voice in his mind, directed at Hannibal. The presence accompanying him was now absent.

“I know you’re peeping. Entertained?”

“Are you when the roles are reversed?” Hannibal asked.

“It’s more like seeing a video of yourself from a time you can’t remember. Uncomfortable. Uncanny.”

“You dislike me with another version of you,” Hannibal observed. He was curious if Will would ever admit it as jealousy.

“Just as you seem to dislike seeing me with anyone else.”

“When you see evidence of another life you could be living, what feels more true to you? The one with me, or the one where you pick up a ready-made family in a bar?”

“The one that has me living in the real world. Is there any chance you will give me space?”

Hannibal squeezed his lips together in a frown. Leaning into the space that Will tried to keep him from, he felt Molly’s presence return. She hadn’t left as he’d hoped. It seemed more likely she had simply been freshening up in the washroom.

He couldn’t seem to turn away from what happened next, even if he knew he should. He could put it together through bits and pieces how Will pulled her onto his lap and ran his hands all over her. Their laughter died down for the most part, but there was the odd giggle that pushed through, different in tone from how it was before. Will was assertive even as he took his time with her, and the part of Hannibal that wanted to observe him warred with the part of him that felt like he would fall apart if he did.

“I hope you’ve opted for contraceptives this time,” he said in his mind before he could think better of it. “Unless, of course, you expect to be a better father this time.”

Will did not respond. He did, however, approach Molly with a new forwardness. Shedding clothes. Sinking backward. Coalescing into a rutting, writing mass.

“Doctor Lecter?”

He snapped his head to the side. The technicians had left and the neurologist was watching him patiently.

“My apologies, I must have gotten lost in thought,” he said. “What did you say?”

“We can move on to discussing his treatment plan now if you are ready,” she said.

He smiled cordially and followed her out of the imaging room, pretending he wasn’t painfully aware of Will making love to another person in a place he could never interfere in the way he wanted to.

By making a meal out of her.

Hannibal could admit to feeling a touch more possessive as he accompanied Will out of Johns Hopkins. Will glanced at him curiously when Hannibal's arm wrapped around his back while they navigated through the halls, but he did not resist it. Nor did he do much when Hannibal settled his hand on Will's thigh just above his knee while he drove, except to rest his leg a bit closer to the console. When they sat for dinner at his home, Hannibal didn't think it was only his doing that led their calves to brush together under the table.

His awareness of Will in his mind did not abate, but he centred his attention on the man before him in an attempt to ignore the rest. Things had felt vaguely celebratory since his medical revelation. Old news that would be old again soon, but Hannibal could appreciate the lift in Will's mood that turned back to him in reciprocation.

"Can dishes be put off for a while?" Will asked as they rose from the dining room table.

"What for?" Hannibal asked, despite suspecting exactly what for.

Will clutched the side of his suit jacket and tugged him away from the table. His eyes shone in the dim light, glassier than usual. "We could use a do-over," he said softly.

"You would allow me a second chance?" Hannibal asked, trailing him instinctively.

"You'll only get so many. Don't forget it."

It took no convincing to pull Will tight as they made their way semi-coordinately to his bedroom. He hadn't even realized how desperately he needed to touch Will with this passion, to allow for no space left between them, and taste the hints of rich organ meat left behind in his mouth. It was no hardship to strip Will nude in the dim light of his room and push him onto his bed, creating an image he made sure to set permanently in his memory.

With Will's leg propped up in the crook of his arm, he dug his fingers back in where he had not appreciated Will enough before. Will coaxed him along with gentle muttering, urging Hannibal to stay with him while they slid together. Hannibal felt his mind coming back into himself until it was like nothing existed but what he held in his hands here and now. It was exactly what he needed to shake the restlessness and jealousy that sliced deep enough to hit his nerves. He couldn't lie and say the presence just at the edge of his reach wasn't captivating, a tempestuous door in his mind that it would be unfair to fling open. He wondered if it would hurt Will the same as it had Hannibal, but Hannibal wasn't fucking some worthless stranger. His love only went to one person, and he would show that love now.

Will helped him to be gentle, body arching up toward him as Hannibal breached him in full. Will's thighs squeezed around his hips, pulling him closer even as he cursed mindlessly at the intrusion. Hannibal brought Will back with a hand under his jaw and he nodded insistently for Hannibal to move.

He pushed Will's thigh up higher against his chest, gripping the back of his knee as he drove deeper. He focused on Will's pleasure this time, ashamed of his negligence the first time. He

wouldn't let it happen again; he wasn't a selfish lover. He was a lover who wanted to make Will feel good. *This* Will, no matter the hint of bitterness of what he suspected was reciprocated jealousy slipping through to his world. Both of them belonged to him. He snapped his hips forward in a quick rhythm, shaking the bed and Will.

Hannibal understood the man in ways hardly anyone else came close to conceiving. They were two sides of the same coin. He understood his pleasures and his sorrows and his deepest desires because deep down, they were just alike. And Hannibal could love him better than anyone else.

"*Fuck,"* Will gasped, his mouth falling open. Hannibal felt triumphant, holding his pleasure entirely in his control.

He pressed a finger below his thrusting cock, feeling where he glided into Will. He suspected his hole was still rubbed raw and sore from the previous night and Will gasped at the contact. It was gratifying to make him feel this way and leave a mark he could feel.

"Oh, Will," he said. There were a million things on his mind, but he worried if he let anything out, it would quickly descend into a love confession that was not yet appropriate here.

Hannibal cupped his face with his other hand, watching the pleasure deepen on Will's face, eyelashes fluttering with the difficulty of staying alert. Hannibal had learned a glorious truth in this world—Will Graham was intensely sensitive. He clutched onto Hannibal's shoulders like he was trying to keep from being dragged away and Hannibal pressed closer in turn, letting his weight fall heavy on his chest. It was addicting to be so close, Will so hot and responsive around him, that it took constant mental control not to finish prematurely inside of him. His body yearned for it.

Will choked off a moan and he buried his face into Hannibal's neck to kiss him there. The Will in his mind felt so close, so easy to slip away to while he had the man below him distracted, but he held back. He would see enough from his vantage point just like Hannibal had seen him, and maybe, just maybe begin to crave more.

Besides, there was something to be said for how real the Will of this world was. There was a lot he could do with his mind, but the direct pleasure of Will grinding against his thrusts and panting below him was unrivaled. His corporeality was a visceral and necessary reminder of what was real.

"Are you close?" Will panted.

He nodded breathlessly, relieved even as he wished they could last forever.

"Me too. Fuck, keep going."

Will shoved a hand between them to touch himself, tugging rapidly as Hannibal sped up, snapping his hips and desperately fighting his stamina.

His pleasure crested quickly, more prematurely than he'd wanted. It was what Will did to him, he knew, no matter his years of practicing that balance of pleasure and control. He

succumbed to the bliss of easy carnality, stuttering out of rhythm and spilling inside of him with a guttural groan.

Will touched himself through it with purpose. Hannibal wanted to push his hands away for his own touch, but he didn't want to interrupt the intense focus he had. He urged himself to stay swollen and pressed inside to that spot that made Will go bleary in the eyes. The ever-present urge to bite was hard to ignore in the crux of Will letting go of himself, so he gave in, letting Will's screwed-up face out of his sight to bruise his shoulder with little teeth-shaped points.

Will moaned in what could have been pain, but he came with the shaking of his hips and a spurt that only just hit Hannibal's stomach.

Will sucked in air through his teeth at his extended touch, wincing and twisting his torso, quick to oversensitivity,

Hannibal pulled out as gracefully as the action allowed, but did not roll away. He was fond of this point of aftermath, crusted with bodily fluids and graciously spent, a rare moment in which one could be satisfied to exist in filth. He did not pull far from where he was pressed close to Will as he dragged a hand down the mess on his stomach.

He continued his messy exploration up to Will's nipples and painted his chest with come until Will twitched and caught his hand.

"You took your second change seriously," he said with a sly smile, eyes closed, "but you're still no gentleman." Hannibal brushed his slick thumb back and forth over his breast and Will tightened his grip enough to halt him completely.

He settled down where he could still admire Will, his head tilted to track the delicate curve of Will's nose, the sunspots dotting the high points of his cheeks, and the fullness of his lashes. His skin was blotchy with the flush of blood across his chest and up to his cheeks as if he'd just come back from a run under the summer sky. It was difficult to imagine Will outgrowing his youthful beauty. The discolouration of his skin was a remnant of his teenage years working in the boatyard, and his puffy under-eye followed the lines of his sorrow rather than of gravity. He felt almost untouched by time, as much as he may have been collapsing under the weight of the world itself.

He wondered if he'd notice the signs of Will ageing in their memory palace, or if his mind would preserve him as he always was, subconsciously or not. Perhaps he would mirror the deepening lines and lightening hair of Will here, and Hannibal would be none the wiser if the alcohol was actually deteriorating his form at twice the speed.

Will turned his head to look at him and for a moment Hannibal worried that he'd be able to tell Hannibal's mind had drifted again.

He returned his attention back to him quickly, reaching out to Will's head where his wound from Tobias was scabbed over, almost begging Hannibal to scratch below to the soft, weeping skin and keep it hurting. He wanted to open it up and take care of it himself. He skimmed his nails over the crust, but held himself back from prying the clotted blood away.

Will appeared entirely tranquil as Hannibal continued his post-coital exploration of what marked him. He skimmed over the lacerations on Will's wrists. They were raw but not deep and none would stay visible for very long. Will's most prominent scar was the smoothed-over knot of skin where he was stabbed when he was a police officer. It looked the same as it always had, but Hannibal had never been able to touch it like he could now. There were also a few odd white lines on his hands where he would guess he got nicked while cooking or working with tools.

There was one textured spot of skin he'd never had a chance to ask about before. There was no good time to do so, not when he'd only noticed it while changing Will after his gunshot in Florence. It had been barely visible then, but as he caressed his hand over his back now, his finger slipped into the smooth indent like it belonged there.

He recalled how hesitant he'd felt bringing the shaking buzzsaw closer to Will's head. It felt so insignificant now, but his chest had ached considering that once Will was gone, he'd never be able to ask him about this small, faded scar.

He turned Will, leaning over him to confirm that it was still there. The small circle of thick, fibrous skin on his back was unmistakable now that he'd noticed it.

"It's not what you're imagining," Will said, rather defensively he thought, but rolled for Hannibal to see anyway. "Thank god it's where it is so I didn't have teachers going after my dad. The neglect could be filled in, but he was as gentle as anything."

Hannibal had admittedly assumed what Will expected. The old cigarette burn was just above the back of his armpit, a strange location for such an intentional mark.

"What is the story then?" Hannibal asked.

"More a bully situation."

"Only the one mark—a matter of escalation?"

"You could say that. They weren't interested in me at first, but I walked up on them trying to set this puppy on fire in this bag. I got her free, but took its place as the next punching bag. I curled up tight and tried not to give them the satisfaction, and I guess—I suspect the cigarette was probably that bit of sadism they craved. Something I couldn't hold back my reaction from, as much as I tried. Hurt like hell."

"Is that when you learned to fight?"

Will turned back to him, raising an eyebrow.

"No. I knew already."

He didn't seem eager to explain more. Hannibal observed him, trying to fill in the dots with his own imagination. He saw Will, the scrawny teenager with southern tanned skin curled up on the pavement to protect his head, stomach, and groin as heavy-booted kicks hit his back and limbs. His t-shirt torn from his arm to reveal rib-bumpy skin, too smooth and soft, too

enticing to ruin. He'd go inside of himself, blank-faced and infuriating the rough boys more, but his goal was not self-preservation, not in full. It was to come out on top, in any way he could. He was always holding back from biting back like he really wanted to.

"I'm going to rinse off," Will said, sitting up abruptly. "Unless you want the bathroom first?"

"Go ahead."

As soon as Will was out of the room, Hannibal laid back and closed his eyes, thoughtful. The Will in his mind was as close as ever, and pulled him in to his world just as fast. His ribbing voice filled his mind.

"You finished this time. Congratulations."

Hannibal smiled from the armchair he'd been placed in in his mind. He was gratified to know Will paid attention without his own efforts. It seems neither of them felt the need to keep this boundary. There were so few boundaries left between them at all.

Will lifted a whiskey tumbler in a cheers-ing motion. Hannibal adjusted the suit he had on to replace his nudity in his mind.

"Did you wish to hurt those boys?" Hannibal asked.

"What do you think?"

"I think your design is not always so simple."

Will tilted his head at him. "No, I suppose not. It wasn't only about… pain, back then."

"It was to ruin them," Hannibal surmised, smiling at the confirmation he could see in Will's expression.

"As you can imagine, that wasn't the only trouble they were getting into. It didn't take much to get the leader's dad to turn an eye. He was a cop, and a severely cruel man…. They never even suspected me."

Hannibal could tell Will was proud of it. That pride came easier than it would have at some point, he suspected.

"Is this what I'm here for?" Will asked, coming out of his memory. "To fill in all the things he won't tell you?"

"Perhaps I find myself curious of the way your interpretations may differ."

"Ah, we're a study of environmental influence now, I see." Will put his glass to his lips. "Maybe you should go back to fucking him and stop thinking so much."

"Sex can be a coping mechanism for some," he said, eyeing the drink. "Among the catalogue of coping mechanisms, I tend to consider it a better one. How is Molly?"

Will glared at him. “How do you rate murder-cannibalism as a coping mechanism?” he asked, avoiding the subject entirely.

Hannibal smiled smugly. “Between the physical activity, the stimulation of the mind with such ‘creative juices’ whirring, and the outcome of a good meal, I’d wager it a very well-rounded one.”

Will’s expression resembled the typical exasperation from the beginning of their relationship before it had morphed into the fondness that came from being in on the joke. Will turned to look to the other side of the room and Hannibal thought he observed another expression there, something wistful.

“And what of it do you hunger for most, I wonder?” Hannibal said.

Will’s head twitched back toward him but he kept his eyes focused on the other side of the room.

“I’m not killing anyone else, so don’t even try.” He took another slow sip of whiskey. “I’m retired.”

“Retired from what you never even saw to fruition? How underwhelming.”

“Randall Tier is in my freezer.”

Hannibal froze, genuinely taken aback at the admission. He observed Will, but couldn’t find any traces of a lie.

He supposed he’d never thought too hard about the whereabouts of the rest of his old patient, but he’d assumed that if anyone knew how to get rid of a body, it was Will Graham. At least, if he wanted to get rid of it. Will would know better than anyone how evidence could slip through the cracks of the FBI’s red tape.

He’d purposefully allowed Will to deal with Randall Tier on his own. If he’d asked for his help, Hannibal would have assisted him of course, but he trusted Will to do what needed to be done. This was above and beyond what he expected.

He ducked his head and smiled mischievously.

“Then it seems we have an opportunity to dine together again, don’t we?”

He expected Will to protest, but he just appraised Hannibal and nodded his head once.

“I’d hate for perfectly good meat to go to waste,” Will said, still avoiding his eyes. He’d evolved greatly from the man Hannibal once knew, if only he would allow himself to indulge as much as he deserved to.

“I agree,” he said genuinely.

“Tomorrow night?”

“It’s a date.”

He pulled out of his mind before he could see any of Will’s resistance. It warmed him to know that Will craved such a thing. He would hold onto that feeling of connection.

The door from the ensuite opened. Will emerged wearing only a towel around his waist and Hannibal pounced out of bed to get his hands on Will again with a sudden second wind. Will scoffed at the manhandling, but Hannibal really only cared about getting his hands back on his moist shower-warmed skin. It was turning out to be advantageous to always have a Will available to him. He pushed him against the nearest cabinet so he could let his weight fall forward into him as he tugged away the knot of the towel

Suddenly, he lost his balance. Something hard knocked against his ankles and he was hitting the floor with a force that shook his bones. He gasped and grabbed Will’s hips before he could come down too hard on his abdomen. Will had stunned him before he knew what was happening.

“You should know better than to grab at people in vulnerable positions,” Will said, his hands settling on either side of his head. Hannibal was worried for a second, but then he noticed the playfulness in Will’s expression.

“You’re not vulnerable,” he said breathlessly.

“No, but you do seem rather obsessed with the idea of me fighting back.”

“I see the fighter in you.” Hannibal lifted up toward him but Will pushed him back onto the floor with a hand on his chest. He took a moment to appreciate the position they were in. Will’s towel had opened up, draping over their hips but not leaving much to the imagination.

“Yeah, like any good FBI agent,” Will said. By the way the side of his mouth quirked up, Hannibal knew he knew he wasn’t kidding either of them. He enjoyed this playful side of Will. He wanted to push him more.

Hannibal moved fast and without warning, yanking up at Will’s legs so he fell backward, but Will hooked an arm around the back of his head just in time to take him tumbling to the side. He scrambled to crawl back on Hannibal while he tried to subdue Will against the floor. It was a fist near his groin that had him losing his grip on Will and rolling under him again. Will panted, holding Hannibal’s wrists against the ground and smiling lopsidedly in victory.

“Oh, and by the way? You’ll want to punch with the knuckles of your middle and index fingers next time. Save you those breaks.” Will flashed a teasingly condescending smile at him.

If Will could play dirty, he could too.

He charged upward against his grip and sunk his teeth into the meat above his collar, not hard enough to tear but hard enough to latch on against Will’s tugging. Will let go of one of Hannibal’s arms to push at his chin, and Hannibal used his newly freed hand to twist into Will’s hair and hold him even tighter.

“Ah. *Ah.*”

Will tapped rapidly against his chest and Hannibal allowed him the mercy after a moment.

“You and your goddamn teeth.”

Will’s blanched skin was steadily darkening into a sharp pink ring with divots where his sharper teeth were, moist and threatening to bleed with the slightest bit more trauma.

“Excuse me, but I don’t think I want to roughhouse with my cock out.” Will pushed up on his knee and stood over him.

Hannibal admired the view. “How little clothing can I convince you to roughhouse in?”

Will stepped over him with one last kick to his arm.

“With the way you use your teeth, I might need full body armour.”

“Nobody is stopping you from doing the same.” Hannibal pushed himself up and stepped into the ensuite bathroom, leaving the door open.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to convince me of, Hannibal, but I’d be careful what you suggest.”

Hannibal paused at the sink. It was difficult to tell if the comment was self-deprecating or threatening.

“I simply want you to indulge any urge that comes to you, including those you might consider non-conventional,” Hannibal said lightly.

He listened carefully for a response that never came. When he finally emerged from the bathroom, Will didn’t give any indication of anything being wrong. He crawled into bed with him, rolled back on top of him, and didn’t push any further for the night.

Grief

Chapter Notes

sad date night commences!!

quick warning for discussions of suicidal thoughts in this chapter

Inside their memory palace, Hannibal browsed the ingredients on Will's counter. Will was sipping from the red wine he'd already opened. Hannibal could tell he'd already drank a fair bit, but his hands were steady and his eyes were alert. The day in their mind was clear and lovely.

He'd been awaiting this moment with no small level of anticipation, wondering if Will would change his mind or resist Hannibal again, but when he arrived in their memory palace, the promised meat was defrosted in the fridge. Will seemed entirely serious about what he wanted to do, and Hannibal, for one, had dearly missed their dinners together.

"I appreciate your creativity and the whole range of meals you could most definitely conceive of right now, but I think what I really want tonight is just a good steak," Will said.

"A classic choice, one I could never fault you for. Randall was lean and young; he will make for a good cut."

Will pulled out the t-bone cut from Randall's loin. It became quickly apparent that Will did not need Hannibal's guidance for this meal, leaving the fact that he simply wanted him here. Hannibal was happy to watch Will salt and sear the steak of his own hunt. He only wished he could be present to taste it with him, but it was easy enough to imagine. He breathed in the essence of Randall Tier in the sizzling meat through Will's mind, inching closer to his shoulder.

The implication must have come to Will as he said, "Perhaps you can choose something for the side."

Hannibal appraised his ingredients while Will put the skillet into the oven to roast to completion.

"Might I suggest searing some mushrooms with garlic and thyme?"

Will nodded a little shakily. "Sounds delicious."

"Heat some oil now. We'll chop the mushrooms, but keep the pieces large."

He admired Will's hands while he worked. It was rare he wasn't too preoccupied in the kitchen to watch him. He never expected to feel so grateful to not be head chef. "Good," he praised him.

He nodded to the skillet just as it was starting to smoke and Will pushed the mushrooms in, tossing them once he did and seasoning with salt and pepper.

"Keep the sprigs whole, but we'll crush the garlic now. Some butter please, a generous amount."

Will reduced the heat and added the final ingredients. Hannibal found himself stepping into his personal space without thinking about it. He indulged his instincts and hesitantly wrapped himself around Will's back, almost expecting to be pushed back by some force of Will's mind. When it didn't happen immediately, he guided Will's hands to tilt the skillet and spoon some of the foaming butter over the mushrooms.

Will was tense, moving with Hannibal in an almost robotic manner.

He leaned in to speak into the back of his ear. "We want to do this until the butter smells nutty. It will infuse the mushrooms with all that delicious garlic and keep it crisp and delicious. Good, just like this."

This close, with the feeling of Will's body between his hips and the oven, it was easier to recall Will's smell in the end, with no one, pig or otherwise, around to obscure it. The sensation of his farmhouse coming alive with the smells and sounds of dinner drew Hannibal in. He nudged his nose against the back of Will's neck, tilting his head up until his mouth was inches from his skin. His entire body warmed and the air seemed to crackle around them.

Will's meat thermometer beeped and he dropped the pan against the stove with a clatter. He tore out of Hannibal's grip and grabbed the skillet from the oven with a towel. Hannibal allowed him his space, able to recognize when Will was too overwhelmed.

Will didn't even look at him as he shakily plated his meal and opened up a brand new twist-off red wine, a reasonable choice if a bit of a disappointing year.

Will brought the food to his table and Hannibal took his place across from him. At last, Will glanced up at Hannibal, a familiar tension filling the air around them. He watched carefully as Will took a hefty sip of wine, cut a bite of steak, and put it in his mouth with some mushrooms pushed onto his fork.

It was a burst of flavours just watching Will enjoy the meal. He could imagine the texture and taste with his imagination, made real through Will's sensations as he shared it in their memory palace.

Will slumped back in his seat and closed his eyes as he chewed. He nodded appreciatively.

"It reminds me… well it reminds me of you."

Hannibal smiled. "You don't need a reminder. I am here with you."

“I’m sitting at this table alone and talking in my mind like a crazy person.”

“I’m here in the way that matters.”

“Yeah, and it’s not enough,” he said, the silence echoing more than his words.

Hannibal frowned, turning his gaze downward. He didn’t know if it was frustration or sadness he was feeling anymore. It felt like any step they took forward inevitably ended in Will spiralling again.

“Perhaps if only you let me try to show you just how much I can be here for you,” he said, knowing Will would catch the implication under his tone. He couldn’t be alone in feeling that every last boundary between them was paper thin.

“I don’t think you realize just how much worse that would make it for me. You touching me here when I know it’s not real—it makes it worse.”

Will pushed his plate away.

“Please eat,” Hannibal blurted out. He paused and then tried again. “It would make me happy to see you enjoy a meal.”

He didn’t know how to express how much it would hurt to see Will throw away this meal.

Will leaned forward and shovelled a large forkful of mushrooms in his mouth, chewing roughly. He slumped back again. It looked as though it was difficult to swallow. He kept his gaze turned down.

When he drained his glass of wine, it appeared to go down easier.

“When is it that we address this new problem of yours?” Hannibal asked, unable to keep the judgment out of his tone entirely.

Will lifted the empty glass in a cheers-ing motion and grabbed the bottle to pour himself another.

Hannibal opened his mouth to speak again but Will beat him to it.

“Let’s speed run this therapy session, why don’t we? I don’t think either of us want to sit through that slog. Alcoholic father, check. A habit of excessive drinking since a young age, check. We don’t really have to belabour the mental illness and trauma, do we? You gave me half of it.”

“All the features of a susceptible profile combined with a high level of grief avoidance and depression,” Hannibal said.

“Have I been effectively avoiding my grief by talking to you every day in my mind?”

“Undoubtedly.”

He sighed, swirling the glass just below his nose. “I’ve inherited not only the alcoholism from my dad but his *functional* alcoholism. We’re a lucky bunch, us Grahams. You can say a lot about our previous educational merits or lack thereof, but there’s no question that we’re competent through and through.”

“As you’ve said. High-functioning alcohol use disorders are particularly compatible with denial.”

Will’s voice rose in volume as he stared into his own wine glass.

“What I’m trying to say here is that occasionally the poison is better than the life lived without.”

He continued on before Hannibal could protest. “I’m more self aware than I think you give me credit for, going on about potential and all that. What do I have to live for? My dogs, and I make sure they’re well cared for. A new girlfriend who I feel comfortable around, and who I don’t want to hurt—and no, who I *don’t* want to make a baby with. I’m done with law enforcement. Those dreams of saving people? They’re harder to reach nowadays. I’m too wary to say I’ve retired for good, but anything I go back to will be for me and me alone, that I’m certain about. I can manage that much, and this is the reason I can manage it.”

He lifted his glass to the light, shimmering red reflected onto his neck.

“Something like this is not sustainable, Will. You know that.”

“No, but people last longer with heart failure and liver damage than they do a bullet between the eyes.”

Hannibal closed his eyes, willing away the mental image and the feeling of loss already permeating his mind.

“Don’t,” he whispered.

“I thought you’d enjoy a compromise,” Will said, his voice taunting and cruel. “Or is it just so bothersome that I’ll ruin all my meat even when you can’t eat me?”

“You get ugly when you drink,” he seethed. He didn’t know how to pick apart the rush of emotions flowing through him head to toe, but he was burning to get something out.

“Then go! How lucky you are to have a second choice. I bet *he* tastes *wonderful*.”

Hannibal lifted to his feet, leering over Will from across the table. “All your attempts at pushing me away will fail. Do you understand why?”

Will shook his head and Hannibal understood that it was more resistance than answer. He continued anyway.

“It’s because we are family, bound by something more. Transcendental and unparalleled. *You*, Will, with all your intuition and transformation, something that could never be recreated no matter the conditions because it evolved as the fabric of our beings twisted together in

shining novelty. I know you understand because we experience the same: the inescapability of this bond that has alienated us from the rest of the world. We cannot survive without each other; do you understand what I am saying to you?"

Will put his head in his hands, hiding his face. "Stop."

"Love," Hannibal breathed out.

He'd intended a confession of sorts but the one word was all that came out, and he supposed that was enough.

"I'm not running, isn't that enough for you?"

"Here you already admitted it isn't enough for you, why would it be for me?"

Will's head shot up and Hannibal could see that his eyes were glassy, the skin surrounding swollen with emotion. "Because I clearly got the short end of the stick," he said. "Who are we kidding? I lost you—you got another one of me! I don't get why every *fucking* thing has to go your way."

"Perhaps the only difference between you and me is I take the opportunities that arise. Do not stray from the truth you know below those uncertainties; if I had it my way, we would not be separated by time and space in this moment."

Will's forearms dropped on the table. "Why'd you have to go out anyway—why did you have to approach Jack like that? This is the second time I've told you to run and you refused to listen to me! Things could have been fine if you'd just—God, just a little while and maybe…."

He shook his head, not saying anymore.

"I was going to turn myself in," Hannibal said. He knew Will had probably garnered that much before, but perhaps he needed to hear it. "I wanted you to know exactly where I was, and where you could always find me. I wanted to put it all into your hands."

"Well, you couldn't have interpreted that situation any worse."

"Evidently. I never planned to abandon you," he said.

"I *feel* abandoned."

"I know."

He took in a deep breath and held it for a moment. Will required gentleness, not a scolding.

He walked around the table, but Will leaned away and said, "Please."

Hannibal stopped in front of his chair and tilted his head. He wanted to reach out, but Will's body language was expressing the opposite desire. It made it feel like the very air repelled him.

Will's speech was stilted when he spoke. "You're in my head. I have… no effective barriers here."

"I only wish to offer you comfort."

"I know. It—it makes it worse."

Hannibal tentatively returned to his seat. It was difficult not to use touch. He relied on it so much in his life and in his relationships. When it came to Will, he craved it deeply. He could only hope that Will would allow him close one day, rather than constantly drawing back out of fear and grief.

"Then I will sit with you," he said. "I will give you company until you feel again that I am here."

Will nodded shortly, accepting this even as he was still clearly upset. It was difficult to see him caught up in such despondency. It hurt to see his meal grow cold and mostly untouched before him. He felt Will's sorrow in the very air around them.

"If I may…" he started. "You are still reeling from the loss of me in your world, yet it seems you won't let yourself grieve. Whether it's because you don't truly believe you should feel this way or because you simply won't allow yourself to, I am not certain, but Will, just because you had turned me away doesn't mean you were prepared for such a seemingly permanent end. Let it in."

"That's a tidal wave I don't know if I'm prepared for, but I concede to your point. I… will deal with my grief in the ways I can."

"It may also require you to admit how you feel about me."

Will looked out the window. "I think we both know how I feel about you," he said softly.

Hannibal ducked his head once in a nod. He didn't always feel such confidence when it came to Will, but deep down he knew what their bond was. Such a feeling could mean nothing else. It warmed his chest to hear even the slightest admission from Will, but it didn't take away from his dread about Will's current mental state.

He knew when he'd reached his limits pushing Will. He was a patient man.

"Now I hope you don't mind, I may let my mind wander…" Hannibal said.

He concentrated until the air around them changed. They were soon in the midst of Germany's Black Forest where he'd hiked as a young man. Will's dinner table stood plainly between vast trees that seemed to reach into the heavens. It was a memory lacking in detail, but he filled in with what he could from his imagination until it felt not unlike they sat within a fairytale. It was his belief that Will would find himself most calm in a setting in nature, and looking across the table, he could tell he was right. Will visibly relaxed at the sights. At a distance, a lake shimmered in the sun, but they remained hidden from the light in the canopy

of a great elm tree. Hannibal erased Will's plate in his mind so it wouldn't bother Hannibal with its incompletion.

They sat together, basking in the fantasy of something nicer.

Clarity I

Will tossed Hannibal a tennis ball from across the living room and Hannibal threw it back. The dogs followed their game intently, their heads whipping back and forth in comical synchronicity.

“Don’t just listen to the ball. You need to be depending on your eyesight,” Will said.

“I’d argue it is equally important that I hone my other senses.”

“This exercise isn’t about that. You just don’t like being bad at anything.”

“How do you know I’m using my hearing?”

“Because you keep staring at me instead of the ball. Either that or you can smell it, but I doubt even you could pick out this scent of dog slobber from the rest.”

Hannibal tore his eyes away from Will and tried to watch the ball. It hit the edge of his hand and fell to the floor before he could snatch it up.

He dropped his hand in disappointment. The big dogs rushed it at once. Will patted his knee until the winner—Harley, the one with the nails always skittering across the floor—brought him the tennis ball.

Will rubbed it off on his knee and tossed it to Hannibal. The ball was unpleasantly damp. He would not drop it again.

They were removing his bandages at the next eye consultation and he wanted to prepare for the worst. Will threw the ball to the side and he forced himself to turn his head to track it. He caught it and then cracked his neck with a slow tilt to the other side.

Will’s mouth quirked up in amusement. It hurt his dignity that Will had to see this, but he’d been too endeared by his offer of help to refuse.

They’d both been taking things slower during their recoveries, Hannibal with his slow-healing eye injury and Will on his heavy rounds of steroids and immunotherapy, aided by Hannibal’s temporary break from killing that allowed him some time off work. Will was lethargic throughout the days but thankfully without the most insidious of its side effects.

“C’mon,” Will said. “Catch a few more and you can have a reward.”

It did not escape him that he was being trained like Will’s dogs, but he was curious to see it to the end. They tossed the slobber-damp tennis ball back and forth until he reached a count of ten, at which point Will threw it just nearly out of his grasp on his bad side and he snatched it out of the air with the tips of his fingers. He held it up proudly and then tossed it into the pile of dogs to signal the end.

“Well done,” Will said flatly. His hands twitched at the armrests, and then he pushed himself up abruptly and sent the dogs outside with a whistle. He returned and settled on his knees in front of Hannibal’s chair.

Hannibal couldn’t hold back his triumphant smile at the realization of Will’s reward. It was a good view and a better feeling as Will rested his elbows on the chair and pulled apart Hannibal’s fly, pressing onto his bulge below. The indignity subsided and his arousal heightened.

He lifted his hips to aid Will pulling his pants off. Will massaged him through his underwear, watching his face intently for his reaction.

“What can I do to make this better for you?” he asked, getting handsy.

Hannibal lounged back. “I think you have some idea.”

Seeing Will’s answering smile, he knew they had an understanding. Will pulled his hips roughly until he was nearly off the chair and stripped off his underwear. Hannibal propped one knee over Will’s shoulder and kept his back arched so he wouldn’t slouch down. He was not unfamiliar with putting on a show for his lovers.

“I knew you’d like this,” Will said, caressing his hands down the back of Hannibal’s thighs. “You do, don’t you? You love it.”

Hannibal nodded, quickly unbuttoning his waistcoat and the shirt below. He already felt too hot. “I’ve been thinking about this with you for longer than you know,” he admitted.

Will held up his hardening cock and Hannibal felt the warm wetness of Will’s mouth at the base of it, then around his scrotum, and lower at his perineum. His tongue rubbed into his sensitive skin hard enough for Hannibal to almost get lost in the sensation until it stopped. He peered over his hips just enough to see Will with his fingers encased in his own mouth, wetting them. He pressed them down through the hot crevice of Hannibal’s ass at last. It took more spit and rubbing to press past Hannibal’s rim with one finger, all the while Will dragged his mouth up to his cock, working with an impressive level of focus.

Hannibal spread his legs further apart until Will could push a finger inside him with an utterly pleasing stretch. For so long it had only been his own fingers and toys, and it was all too true that he’d been dreaming of Will’s fingers since nearly the beginning. Will’s strength was clear and unwavering in his ministrations. The way he licked and sucked his cock and scrotum at the same time sent heat up Hannibal’s chest. He wasn’t working to get Hannibal off, rather indulging him with his hands and mouth without a sense of urgency.

It seemed impossible that Will could be deceiving him with such attention. This felt too real. Will skirted that line of too much and too little, ensnaring Hannibal in the midst of delirium as blood pooled in his groin, bringing his heartbeat with it. Will brushed against his prostate repeatedly, and Hannibal sunk down in the chair, boneless.

“Good, good, you are so good to me. Look at you,” he muttered, stroking a hand down Will’s face.

Will took him deeper into his throat, sucking with intent at the praise. His throat jolted with a gag and he blinked away his watery eyes, sliding back up to the head of his cock bashfully. Hannibal chuckled, committing the image to memory.

“I’m still getting used to a few things here,” he defended himself, clearly taking Hannibal’s amusement more pessimistically. “Any tips for me, Doctor?”

“Your practice is delightful, I have half a mind to let you figure it out yourself… but I could guide you.”

Will’s gaze was exasperated even as he nodded. His defences were up yet he wanted this, Hannibal could tell.

He tangled his fingers into Will’s hair, gliding over his skull until he held him at the curve down to the nape of his neck. He pulled Will down onto him, rolling his hips gently. Will picked up the rhythm quickly, closing his eyes in concentration. Hannibal didn’t slow even as he felt Will struggle to swallow back his spit. He wanted to see if Will became a slobbering mess around him, if he committed to Hannibal’s pleasure past the misguided dignity he held onto by a string.

Hannibal usually held more control over himself to not push his partners too much during sex, but it was difficult to hold back in any matters when it came to Will.

He thrust a bit harder and Will choked, half-coughing around his cock. That was hard to resist too. He usually held back his more sadistic streak unless a partner asked for it first. He had to reign in his own desires for now, no matter how he anticipated Will’s acceptance. No matter how curious he was to see Will fight back.

To Will’s credit, he took it all with barely a stutter in his movements. He’d guessed Will’s propensity to giving pleasure when Margot had shared a few out-of-pocket comments with him during therapy. She’d clearly been trying to catch him off guard, but he’d sensed a truth below.

He suspected Will often protected his mental forts better by focusing on his partners. He hoped Will would accept his own pleasure with less baggage. It meant making this good for him, even if Hannibal had some less-than-savoury thoughts regarding the man below him.

A voice reached his mind, echoing with such distance that he almost thought it was his own.

“Is it that hard not to hurt me?”

For a moment he was worried things had evolved to Will truly being able to read his mind, but then he remembered how Will’s insights could feel much the same as having his mind read.

Will’s voice came clearer when Hannibal acknowledged his presence. “You won’t have forever before he figures you out, if he hasn’t already. Might as well play out all your desires now.”

He was sarcastic in the unpleasant way that came with his drinking. Hannibal could practically smell the beer on his lips.

“It’s not a good time to talk, my dear,” he said back in his mind, sickly sweet. Will wouldn’t be able to mistake his passive aggressiveness even in his haze.

He rolled his hips more gently and stroked Will’s hair encouragingly. Above all, he wanted to bring Will pleasure and happiness; he was simply of the opinion that it took some pushing to get Will to the stage he could let go and accept it without shame. It was an advantage that Will reacted so divinely through each struggle; pain was a passion for Hannibal—that beautiful edge on the line of death. He had long since given up the possibility that he would kill Will one day, so pain was what he had left.

“When he does find out about you—and he will, soon—this is what he’s going to think about, you know. The betrayal, yes, but also how revealing intimacy can be. It’s not something without consequences for me. You learn things about a person’s deepest desires, yours being that you’re a man of destruction in all things.”

“And does the shared pleasure become irrelevant at the time of reveal to you?” he shot back.

“I don’t have the masochistic streak you think I do; I’m just unlucky enough to have fallen in with an egotistical sadist. I’m still not convinced he doesn’t know the truth of you already. Putting you in my mouth is a sure way to tear down your walls. It’s almost too easy.”

“When you look deep inside, what wars most in your mind? The taste for violence that you fear reflects mine the same, or the validation of feeling like the victim you wish you were?”

Will’s resulting silence made him think he went a touch too far, but he didn’t pay it any mind, trying his hardest to be present and aroused for the man below him giving him such lovely service with his mouth and hands.

Suddenly, the Will in his mind cleared his throat. He began to speak with a steady intonation.

“Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more—” a knowing smile that seemed to shine through even when Hannibal tried his hardest not to see him “—the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.”

Hannibal recognized the passage from Moby Dick and recalled a past promise between them, but between the stimulation and the vibrating timbre that filled his mind, he struggled to grasp the intentions of this speech.

“Consider all this; and then turn to the green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one

insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!"

"Will," Hannibal gasped, realizing after a moment that his name had tumbled off his tongue in the real world. Will sucked hard on the head of his cock, following his lips with his fingers. Hannibal's thighs started shaking, and before he could pull himself back together, he was spilling in his mouth.

He gaped at the sight of Will's mouth filling with each squirt that leaked from his cock. Will ducked his head quickly, holding his cock loosely in his mouth without spilling until Hannibal was finally spent. A dribble spilled past his cheek and his throat bobbed. He kept his lips pressed to the head of Hannibal's cock and blinked rapidly.

At last, he licked his lips and slowly extracted his hand from inside Hannibal. He looked up expectantly.

"You surprise me every time," Hannibal praised, breathless, and a little unsure who he was really talking to. He sat back and pulled up his pants.

Will began to stand and Hannibal pulled him forward so he fell sideways across his lap. He huffed in surprise.

"I'd hope so. Hasn't even been many times," Will muttered, still a bit breathless and stiff on Hannibal's lap. His not-insignificant weight pressed an ache in his thigh, but it was nice knowing it was Will's.

"Not only in sex. I find I've already given up the hope of figuring you out completely. It's much nicer to simply see what you do."

So too did he wonder if he knew everything that Will was doing. The thought of Will seducing him as deception left a bad taste in his mouth, but it didn't feel far from the truth of their dynamic in another life, had they evolved their intimacy into touching. The voice in his head had thankfully quieted, but his feelings about it lingered unpleasantly.

Will tilted his head. "Is that the appeal?"

"Is it for you?" Hannibal asked, considering all the questions Will's actions posed to him.

"It's true I can't read you as well," Will admitted, settling down until he was softer against Hannibal's chest. "It can be… invigorating that way. A kind of peace to it, too."

"Agreed, yet your mystery isn't everything to me. Do you understand that I simply like you, Will?"

He wanted to tell Will that he would welcome truth between them. He would not complain of boredom, or take for granted any transparency. He could be forgiving if only Will was willing to stay with him. There was an appeal to such certainty that they'd never had between them before.

"We have a good time together, don't we?" Will said, looking away.

“Indeed, we do.”

Will licked his lips and swallowed, his mouth still pink and swollen from his pleasuring. “Your presence isn’t as loud to me as others. Helps me to enjoy our time together.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“And the sex ain’t half-bad,” he said dryly, pushing off from his lap.

Hannibal smiled and let him go.

“Allow me to stay late tonight then. Seems I have something to prove.”

Following his night at Will’s, Hannibal filled his Bentley with gas and settled in for a long trip.

He was satisfyingly sore, with an ache spreading up his spine on his lower back. He left unshowered by design. He didn’t want to lose this scent of sex or the heat across his skin that came with it.

The night stayed at the forefront of his mind, repeating in perpetuity as one memory he was certain he would recall forever. He was never one to disrespect a meal, but even he could admit that dinner felt like biding their time until they could fall into bed together again. Hannibal had always considered Will rather passive in most physical contact, but something made him clingier tonight. He didn’t hide his excitement in the confirmation that Hannibal was more than willing to swap places in the bedroom.

It was a relief that they could share in these carnal desires seemingly without any of the complications or bittersweetness that plagued the rest of their lives. They fit together well, and he thought they would fit even better when they saw each other in truth. Will, despite the shame he carried like a keloid bursting from his skin, merged with him in such passion. It was becoming easier to push him to senselessness.

He could feel the memory on his skin. Hannibal had sunk down and ridden him until Will’s eyes were fluttering. Hannibal watched his muscles contract with every movement and then with restraint. He patted Hannibal's flank and spun them around.

It had been glorious—his curls bouncing off his forehead and his mouth red and wet above him. His bed frame was certainly not stable and punctuated his every movement with heart-shattering cracks against the wall, slowing only to bring them back from the edge and make it last longer. Hannibal could have lasted even longer, his previous orgasm allowing him to maintain that state of over-sensitivity longer than he thought was possible.

He shifted in the car seat to feel the slight burning. Will had been a generous lover, continuing to fuck him with his fingers far past the time he should have left on a weekday.

"I knew you'd love it," he heard echoing in his mind. "*Look how well you take it, God, Hannibal."*

To his greater fortune, Will hadn't interrupted from their memory palace a second time. Whether he fell asleep or simply refrained, Hannibal was able to fully immerse himself in the present. He wanted to be able to enjoy it all. He and Will had found bliss together and it was far too precious to let go of. He could only imagine how good it would be when they came together in their full potential.

Internally he corrected himself—*if,* except he'd never truly doubted who Will was. He only had to question the lengths he could go without breaking him. In this moment there were things he needed to be certain of, and true clarity did not come without a little risk.

It was nearly morning when he came upon the ranch. He parked on the road so his tracks couldn't be seen in the mud and he walked to the grain silo, pulling his gloves on.

He was uncertain even now what he would do, but he was also too curious to walk away. He would not cling to safety when he held this wonder and inspiration in his bones.

He climbed up the icy ladder on the side of the silo. Peering inside, there were only two bodies below, light-skinned and placed thoughtlessly in the centre with clear signs of decomposition below their cracking seal. James Grey was still learning his craft.

Hannibal knew that the end result was spectacular, an ambitious and visionary eye to the Gods, and one he wasn't certain he had the patience to recreate or wait for.

Now fully decided, he returned to his car, drove to the beaten-down farmhouse an acre down, and took James Grey screaming from his bed.

It was not a struggle for Hannibal to operate on little sleep, but he did find himself more distracted and restless as he waited for word of the new body coming under Jack's radar and, undoubtedly, Will's. A small town farmer from Ohio found curiously far from home, cut up and twisted in a field to resemble the Eye of Providence, his unblinking right eye at the centre —something that might be, in few ways, more clear to the Will of this world.

Something that just might reveal to Hannibal what Will really knew.

While he waited, he attended his appointment with the ophthalmologist and upon removing the bandage, found he could see no more than before. It was difficult to stifle his disappointment even as the doctor tried to reassure him that he was still in the process of healing. When he looked in the mirror, the surrounding skin of his eye was an ugly twist of pink flesh and emerging scar tissue. His eyeball was clouded with burst blood vessels and his pupil was deformed and perforated. Tobias had impressive aim, he had to admit. He refused to cover up as he left the hospital, promptly checking his phone.

The notification he'd been hoping for was absent.

What he found during the rest of his day was silence. He cleaned his eye. He tidied his desk for the umpteenth time. He clicked his fingers together incessantly. His meagre work did little to sway his mind—he was too used to having as many trains of thought.

As much as he was still bitter about Will's behaviour last night in his mind, he found himself drawn to that forever irresistible place for a better distraction. He inched closer to that presence that could so easily capture all of his attention.

"Why, why, why, what a night you've had," Will said upon his entrance. They stood together in Hannibal's office.

Whether he was talking about the sex or the murder, Hannibal was uncertain.

"Against all I know, I still hope to come here and find you sober," he said to divert the conversation.

"I'm sober enough," he declared, perching on Hannibal's desk.

"You know what you are, Will?"

"Hm?"

He turned to face him and said, "You're really something of a bitch when you wish to be."

Will was silent for only a moment before he leaned back and laughed. Hannibal couldn't help but smile too. It was difficult to truly resent him.

"Wow, tell me how you really feel," he said, chuckling and shaking his head.

"Our relationship is one of reciprocal harm. I can hardly blame you."

Will had a strange look in his eye at the phrase. He pushed himself off the desk.

"I was waiting for you to come back. I want to show you something."

Hannibal tilted his head curiously. "Must it be now?" he asked, glancing at his phone.

"It'll be best not to put this off."

"Is that so," he said, struggling not to feel suspicious at Will's ambiguity. Will stepped directly in front of him. He didn't think he could look away from Will if he tried. Will's eyes were dark as if he'd gotten little sleep and his mouth twitched between grimace and grin.

"You're going to want to run," Will said. "You're going to want to hide where your mind won't allow you to hide. In this case, it is important to me that you stay with me. Can you do that?"

Despite all the wariness he felt from Will's words, he couldn't imagine ever not wanting to stay with him. He observed him, trying to feel below for his true meaning.

Will seemed satisfied, whether it was something in Hannibal's expression or if he simply knew he would give in. The landscape began to change around them and the room fell away. It felt as though they were travelling to a far off place, gaining velocity in their minds. Hannibal wanted to dig his heels in, resist the change, but Will's resolution was unmoving. He could not put a name to his fear, but it existed—certainly some part of him knew what was happening as they spiralled to the dark centre of his mind palace.

Between drooping willows and junipers, in the dim light of dusk that would soon welcome fireflies, he saw his childhood home rise to the sky in all its glory, exactly as it had been the last time he laid eyes on it.

Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal fell backward, catching himself in the damp mounds of leaves where the day never warmed them through the thick shrubbery overhead.

His entire world felt tilted and like he wasn't done falling. He cringed at the dewy sweetness of the garden, unmaintained and left to grow and expand until there was nothing left to do but rot. He lifted his hands palm up in disbelief, seeing them smeared with mud and bits of crumbling leaves, shining ominously red against his skin. Will kneeled down before him, examining him like Hannibal was some creature he found in the woods.

"Why would you bring me here?" he hissed. The overpowering smell of the place made bile threaten to rise in his throat.

"It's how I found you before. There are things I need to reconcile, and here seemed as good a place as any to start," Will said, which didn't illuminate much at all.

Will grabbed Hannibal's soiled hand and pulled him up. He urged himself to stay steady.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He felt for the surrounding rooms of his memory palace, seeking a latch that should have come naturally to him, but no concentration would come to him—he felt stuck, like this place had simply been waiting to trap him in its vines. Was it Will who had cut him off from everything but this place? He couldn't even open his eyes. He should have been able to open his eyes.

"Take us out of here," he said, trying not to beg. "If you don't wish to ruin what we are, you will take me out of here."

He'd always known he could not return to this place. Certain memories—certain monsters—never truly let go, not held by a cage of his own making, not stifled by revenge, nor soothed with time. He'd nearly lost himself here before.

"Do you trust me that I won't let anything hurt you?" Will asked.

"I trust… that you will hurt me to the extent that you desire."

"No more. No less."

He knew more than anyone that Will could be merciless. He found his feet moving to follow after him anyway. Despite it all, the boundaries he'd decimated without consent, he couldn't think of anything to do but follow him.

"Good," Will praised, sounding confusingly how he had last night in his other world—his real world, where Hannibal had removed himself from this place completely, crossing the sea and shunning it even from his mind.

He wanted to indulge everything Will asked of him, only this had been the one thing Hannibal could not endure. Will should have known not to ask it of him, unless of course the only reason was to hurt him.

He followed a step behind Will, tucking his head down where he could not see what was ahead of him. He did not want to look at the all-too-familiar castle before them or Will. To his continued dejection, Will chuckled.

“Resent me all you want, God knows how I’ve resented you back.”

It stung that Will could brush it off so easily as if this was a mere slight in their history of betrayals. He glared at the back of Will’s head until he halted abruptly. Hannibal followed his downward gaze and sucked in a sharp breath at the small tombstone before them.

His throat felt tight as he read the familiar name. There was a small bouquet of flowers perched at its base, only slightly wilted. He didn’t think it was part of his conception of this place, and so it had to be Will. They were a bright touch in a rotted place, seemingly without any malicious intent.

“You’ve been coming here,” Hannibal muttered.

It touched him and unnerved him in equal amounts, but didn’t bring him anywhere closer to forgiveness. He knew his face was still soured with anger.

“The last time you felt betrayed by me, you cut me open,” Will said. “Tough luck with that now, we’ve both been leashed, no matter how much you want us to pretend. It might be the one thing that keeps us peaceful.”

Will was already turning to leave. Hannibal tried again to escape from his own mind, but he couldn’t even sense anything beyond this place. He caught up with Will. He couldn’t bear to be alone.

“I felt so much resentment for you before,” Will continued. “I sure as hell deserved my grudge, but as soon as you—died, it all dissipated. I didn’t have the strength for it anymore. Now there’s all this pain, I’m marked with it all over, and there’s nowhere to put it. I’m dealing with it in the ways I know how.”

Hannibal stopped before the entrance. Will pushed one of the double doors open and beyond was only darkness. There was a different scent coming from the inside. Hannibal didn’t know what was worse: the rot from the garden or the diseased mustiness inside.

“I can’t,” he said simply, voice hoarse.

“You will,” Will replied, and stepped past the threshold.

He'd rarely been anxious in his life, but looking behind him at the dark, overgrown courtyard that hid shadows his eyes refused to focus on, he knew what he was experiencing was true fear. His heart thumped so fast in his chest that he was awash with dizziness. More than his fear of what lay beyond was how he would spiral if he was left alone. Will’s voice,

condescending as it was, kept him grounded in this nightmare. If there was anyone who could pull him out of the darkness after falling too deep, it was him. He was vital to Hannibal's survival.

He stepped inside the former Castle Lecter. He barely recognized the interior. This was not the home where he had once run and played with his sister; inside was nothing but a place for death.

He picked up the pace so he wouldn't lose Will in the musty halls. They were ensconced in near-pitch darkness where the windows were too grimy to let in the dying evening's light. He found Will by the clacking echo of his feet. His eyes adjusted until he could only just make out the back of his plaid shirt, as if following the ghost of him.

"Surely you are not caught by the misconception that we can only hurt each other through violence," he called after Will, speed-walking at his heel. "There was hardly a scar on me to show what was done by your hand, but make no mistake, no one has ever hurt me the way you do. I consider you an expert in it, in fact. So is that what this is? You hurt me in the way you know how in your twisted concept of justice. Will it make you feel better?"

Will spun on him so fast that Hannibal nearly ran into him.

"Have you considered that this might be good for you? The tether you have for maintaining your emotions is *this* thin. You get by without blowing up your entire world by the skin of your teeth."

"And yet I do maintain it all, without drowning myself with poison."

Will pointed at his own chest, the white skin of his hand glowing in the dark the way his face didn't, still dark to Hannibal.

"I recognize what's wrong with me—all the *myriad* of things that are wrong. You, on the other hand, are completely delusional. You can't tell that you're spiralling to an inevitable end all because another version of me let you in."

Hannibal frowned, straightened up, and considered if it would feel good to slam Will back against the dusty wall. Would they slam right through the weakened plaster and fall into a pit below, swallowed by the darkness of the property? He could feel it now—the vertigo as he realized the drop below would be never-ending.

At Hannibal's silence, Will stepped closer, coming nearly nose-to-nose with him.

"I brought you here because I don't think you've ever learned to grieve in your life, only run to the next beautiful thing you can find. It clouds your vision, and it will be your undoing."

Will took one hesitant step backward and before Hannibal could process what he was doing, Will darted off into the darkness ahead of him.

Hannibal didn't think before chasing after him. He would not be left in the dark halls of his misery alone. Will was startlingly fast, gone around the next corner before Hannibal had

barely moved.

He ran without thinking about where he was going. He had the sense that he was taking the same path as he had as a young boy, one stride for every two from his short boyhood legs. His body grew weary faster these days, but he had the difference of feeling the great strength he'd gained since, right down to his core. He wanted it to be enough to save him from this place, but the further he went, the more the halls seemed to expand around him until he was hardly any bigger than that reedy little child he'd once been. Will was so far ahead, not nearly as slow as Hannibal felt. He strained his lungs with the effort he needed to keep up.

Castle Lecter was made up of few grand walkways leading to wide rooms constructed for swaths of guests, but beyond were dozens of hidden passages, unlit and unmaintained by even the most trusted staff. As Will slipped behind the cabinet in the kitchen and entered the first of one, it was clear he was familiar with them too.

Hannibal, with hardly a moment of dread-fuelled hesitation, hurried into the dank passageway after him and immediately felt its comparable crush, so dark and tight that there was hardly any space for his broad body to fit the way he'd fit as a child. He turned awkwardly sideways and skipped forward, nearly falling with his speed, when Will turned abruptly at the end of the hall.

Hannibal crashed shoulder-first into the wall at the end. A snarl ripped out of his throat, and when he ran again, leaning forward, it was with his eyes set on Will like a predator's.

This man who had torn his life apart, who had torn his heart apart, and still ran from him when they should have been past this.

He halted to a stop right before the ground gave out before him, nearly losing his balance with the momentum he'd built up. He imagined that endless pit that would surely be the end of him, too deep to ever crawl out of again, but when he looked again it was a simple staircase. Will was already going down, his footsteps echoing in an endless spiral.

He knew where he was.

There was a dark figure in the shadows to his side. He tensed, but when he focused his eyes, it was only Chiyoh, before him with her endless youth.

She stood straight-backed with her gun in arm, guarding the dark entrance.

"I did not kill her," he told her, panting.

"You've said that before."

I did not save her either, he thought.

He had not gone back to give her another chance. He'd allowed these halls to stay haunted, with only one guard to keep it contained. All of his stability hinged on one woman who could never stand in for his sister. She was already aware.

"Your *nakama* is almost there," Chiyoh said simply. *Go.*

Hannibal ran without another glance. He took the steps two at a time, determined to catch Will once and for all. He could only see a few steps in front of him with the stone pillar blocking his vision between. With his hands on either side of the wall, he bounded down and down and when he turned a few stories down, Will was there in front of him.

He crashed into Will, tackling him off the last couple of steps. They flew through the air and collapsed across the uneven floor at the bottom, hard enough that they probably would have broken a few bones had this been real.

He laid half on top of Will for another moment, reeling from the imagined impact, before he rolled away and let Will push himself up with a wince.

Will was staring ahead rather than at Hannibal. He followed his gaze to the figure hanging down from the ceiling, lit absurdly by barely melted pillar candles.

He was confused at first whether it was man or creature, but then he realized it was something entirely other. His breath stole away.

The man was stripped free of skin and flesh from the elements, but his skeleton and a few clinging hairs still hung from an impressive net of rope. Out from his sides were two shimmering sets of glass wings, drooped down like a resting *Lepidoptera*. He felt minutely safer, as if Will had hung an angel to protect him, fashioned out of the scum that he knew the man hanging once was.

This monster devoid of power.

Panting, Will said, “Chiyoh killed him. I… commemorated him. I made it mean more than that.”

“To yourself,” Hannibal said, pushing himself up on his knees. Will helped him up the rest of the way.

Will scrunched up his face and shook his head. “It wasn’t my mercy to give. I just knew you wouldn’t want it to be left ugly.”

It occurred to him that with their fates falling so differently, this didn’t exist in his new world and never would. This place had only been rendered tame in one world.

“Was it my mercy to give, or Chiyoh’s?” Hannibal asked.

“She did so much for you, is there any difference?”

“In my understanding, her real plight was always driven by Mischa. Just as mine is. Is there any difference in that?” he shot back.

“Did he really kill her?” Will asked, gesturing to the body.

The man had become so much more in Hannibal’s mind since that day. It was the protection of his psyche that left him with no real memories but what he constructed after the fact. It was unreliable by nature, and Hannibal required nothing more. This man represented the

entirety of her brutalization, and here he hung as a gentle work of art made of Will Graham's hands.

"Perhaps what really matters is that you ate her," Will said. "You did, didn't you? Of course you did."

"I've often wondered where I would be right now if I had wished for something else," Hannibal said.

Will understood. "If you had chosen her instead of me."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you?"

He sighed and closed his eyes. "You were the only thing on my mind."

Down at his sides and still stained with the earth, his hands were trembling. This was his mind—his creation. This place of all places he was supposed to be safe and whole.

"Do apologies mean anything between us at this point?" Will asked. "It doesn't matter—I do regret that I felt the need to bring you here, but I maintain my reasoning."

There continued to be a startling amount of humanity in Will's cruelty, perhaps even more than in his kindness. Hannibal could not even admit to deserving an apology, for all the hurt he had.

"But don't you see?" Will continued. "There's nothing even *here.* It was almost disappointing. I've hardly ever seen a place so devoid of… life, everything. You've already abandoned it as thoroughly as you could and I think you know it too. I needed you to see that locking this place up is not going to be the thing that gives you control. Maybe it's time to listen to someone else."

"You mean you?" It was difficult to think he'd missed so much, that Will could be showing him the truth right now.

"Is that so crazy?"

Hannibal turned, stepped forward, and internally gave himself an allowance for what he knew he shouldn't do. He crowded up against Will until they hit a wall, eliciting a gasp out of the other man. It was clear he hadn't expected this. Hannibal put his hands on either side of Will and pressed against him with his chest so he couldn't leave.

"I already chose you, Will, do you understand what that means?"

Will was breathing heavily like he had after their chase, but Hannibal refused to pull back.

"You wanted… another version of me," Will said. "You chose to go *back,* not to me."

"A mistake."

It blurted out of his mouth before he could really consider it, but it tasted right, even for all the pleasure he'd garnered from that world. Before him, his safety; his home.

Will's hands slipped over his ribs and Hannibal couldn't tell whether it was to hold him or push him back. He basked in the feeling while he could and Will held still.

"I did it all to fix things, but Will…"

Will spoke before he could, bitter through clenched teeth. "But you didn't actually regret all you did to me."

"There are things I would give back to you if I could, but not in replacement of it. No. I would do it all again to have you."

Hannibal brushed his thumb across Will's forehead where his scar was pink and slightly protruding. His other hand settled on his abdomen between their bodies and he felt Will's stomach flutter in response.

"I'd rip you to shreds to have you back."

A noise escaped from the back of Will's throat, so slight that Hannibal nearly missed it, but he was certain it was real. He'd grown familiar with the tells of Will's arousal, even if it was in another world—the shining of his glassy eyes beyond fluttering eyelashes, his subconsciously wetting tongue, the twitch in his hands, the slight tilt of his head that exposed his throat—

Hannibal pressed his body tight against him. Will's eyes flickered downward and his hands gripped him tighter, nails first.

"How do you know for certain it was your wish?" Will whispered.

Hannibal stilled.

Will licked his lips and gulped. "I had my suspicions about what you were writing. I took your notebook off your body before the ambulances could arrive. I followed the equation, did some research… I knew your teacup metaphor sounded familiar. It had a lot of remnants of the theory, but nothing more than that—theory. There was no catalyst, barring the bullet through your brain."

"I thought much the same," Hannibal muttered. "I chalked it up to an act of God. A mere idea come into fruition."

"Yes, but you weren't the only one with a wish. It was all I could think of as I kneeled over your body: I didn't want you to die. I didn't want you to stay."

Hannibal found himself devoid of air. Devoid of thoughts.

"Like any malevolent granter of wishes, God, whoever… I believe it was punishment, not magic," Will said. "You were never supposed to go there."

Hannibal had always considered Will the one to bring magic into his life. Could he have misattributed this miracle of his beloved? Had he not resigned himself to waiting for Will no matter the cost?

“I imagine you know what you would have chosen if you really had the chance. He’s not going to accept you the same because it wasn’t supposed to *be* like this,” Will said insistently, and then clutched onto him tighter.

Hannibal did not watch the place around him change so much as he felt the heaviness dissipate. His feet lifted off the ground and his sense of gravity shifted until he was leaning forward and letting his weight fall on Will. He blinked at the natural light before him. They were laying on Will’s bed, the mattress below Will’s back where the wall had just been. Will did not seem to mind his weight—he’d brought him here after all—so he did not move off of him.

Will grimaced, blinking rapidly but not moving his eyes from Hannibal’s lips. “You make it harder and harder to deny you,” Will whispered. “It’s about the hardest damn thing in the world.”

Hannibal leaned down until their lips were just barely touching. Will sucked in a breath.

“The way you make me feel—” Will whispered. “It doesn’t seem like it should be possible.”

Hannibal tilted his head, running his eyes up and down Will’s face. He glowed like a dream, splattered with scars that contained memory and familiarity and security.

Will’s mouth twitched in the ghost of a smile. “It doesn’t always feel medically okay, to be honest.”

“Are you ready to take what you deserve?” Hannibal asked.

He didn’t just want to seduce Will. He wanted to pull him apart like he’d never been before.

“I’ve told you. It’s not real enough. It’s even worse that I did this to myself; the cruelest kind of continence.”

Hannibal brought one hand up to cup the side of his face. “I have touched you in the world, Will. If not your own, have trust in my imagination to make it as real as it can be.”

Will’s lips parted delectably. Hannibal let his drag across them again as he spoke.

“We’ve waited so long for this intimacy. I’ve come so close to you in every way I can, but it still feels so new. I may spend my whole life reaching for more of you, and it would be worth it for this.”

Will rolled them over, still pressed tight as he leaned over Hannibal. He ground his hips instinctively, rocking against the junction of Hannibal’s hip as his face screwed up in what could have been agony. Hannibal laid a reassuring hand on the nape of his neck. It was hard not to grab his hips and rut against him.

“Will. Give in.”

He considered begging. He didn’t know what he would do *without* it—every second waiting a new kind of agony. Will drew back and he prepared for resistance, but then Will started moving.

He fumbled open his own fly and then ripped Hannibal’s shirt upward, pushing it right over his head and leaving Hannibal ruffled and in half-disbelief. He didn’t have time to gather himself before Will was tugging off his trousers with enough force to pull his hips right off the bed. It seemed like no time at all and no effort on his behalf before they were nude.

He was astounded by Will’s desperation and initiative; he needed a minute to breathe it all in, but Will was getting back on him and it was all he could do just to catch him. To hell with it, he thought—he had all he’d ever wanted. He followed exactly what his mind, body, and soul wanted.

They crashed their lips together at the same time, clicking teeth and smashing lips. Hannibal sat halfway up to meet him and Will promptly slammed him back down with his weight.

Realigning their hips, he grinded down into Hannibal, locking their legs together to hold tight. He opened his mouth against Hannibal’s and all he got was all teeth, a slow bite down like he couldn’t do anything else. Hannibal gasped at the clench of teeth around his cupid's bow and Will thrust harder, creating a burning friction between their skin.

The space around them seemed to tremble and he realized he could see no farther than the familiar rumpled bed, the rest nothing but startling, void-like darkness. The mattress rocked below them like it was barely held down by gravity at all.

“Hannibal—”

Will stopped only to reach a hand between them and feel where Hannibal was swollen into an aching red mass for him. He clutched onto Will’s curls, gasping at how *real* it felt, blending with memories of the wrong world. He was throbbing and oversensitive already and Will was open-mouthed gaping at him.

Will shimmied back, clumsy and kicking Hannibal with his hurry as he got himself between Hannibal’s legs and forced them apart with his hands under his kneecaps. He was flushed all the way up his chest and across his cheek, blotchy with his exertion and arousal. He thrust into Hannibal relentlessly, bottoming out within seconds.

Will’s face screwed up and he choked through an audible moan. Hannibal’s mouth fell open and he tensed at the feeling of fullness. It should have been burning and dry but he just felt *good*—he only just recalled the lack of limitations that they had here. Here, they could do anything.

Will pulled back and fucked into him again and again, rocking the entire world with them. Slick and perfect, hitting him just right in such a familiar manner that he knew it was true. Hannibal clutched onto his ass, pulling him in and in like he could sink right into his body until there was nothing between them as they became one writhing, endless mass of pleasure.

No ceiling above them or bed below them. It was nothing but them; everything was them. Slipping a hand behind Will's, it no longer felt possible to tell who was inside of whom.

His pleasure peaked at the overwhelming stimulation, ripping out of him with an uncontrollable quaking in his bones. They had no chance of lasting any longer, he thought, as Will spilled and spilled inside of him, clutched to him suffocatingly tight.

"Will, oh, *you,"* he gasped.

Every one of Will's breaths was an audible moan as he came down, collapsing on top of Hannibal's chest. Hannibal felt much the same.

They lay quietly as they gathered themselves together. It was rare that Hannibal didn't feel bursting with thoughts, poetry, song when he was around Will, but he'd been thoroughly wiped of anything but this bliss. After-effects of their pleasure pulsed through the room and he didn't consider this setting a drawback at all.

He caressed a hand down the back of Will's sweat-damp neck to remind himself that he was there. Teeth dragged along his temple, open and ready to bite. Will squirmed on top of him, and Hannibal couldn't be certain at first until he interlocked their legs that Will was wanting more.

"God, you…" Will said, equal parts frustrated and enamoured. For once, Hannibal hadn't even done anything.

Hannibal wrapped his arms around him to cradle him close, opening his mouth for a real kiss. It had all happened so fast and he wanted more too. He was ready to get entirely lost in Will, but then he twitched and for just a moment he was back in his office, sitting back in his leather chair with his eyes closed, and there was a knocking at his door demanding his attention. It felt like a dream invading his reality, but then he remembered it was the opposite.

Will startled, hearing the intrusion too.

"We're no longer alone," Hannibal said. "I need—excuse me."

It hurt to pull away from Will's crutches for good, especially feeling him pull tighter the second before he opened his eyes to the real world—the world that no longer felt very real at all.

He did not know if his dread was for the probability that the other Will was at his door, or if it was for the chance of anyone else arriving. All his lights were on and there was no fooling his surprise visitor that he wasn't there.

He stood up, blinking away the image of Will in his bed lingering across his eyes, and pulled away his pants at the crotch where ejaculate pooled uncomfortably in his pants. He picked up his scalpel and answered the door with a shaking hand.

Chapter End Notes

oops another cliffhanger, i couldn't help myself!

I'm going to post the next three chapters on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday since the 2nd one is rather short. we're nearly there! more drama and revelations to come...

Clarity II

“Doctor Lecter, our apologies for intruding on you like this,” Jack Crawford said.

Hannibal blinked at the pair in his doorway. Alana Bloom stood at Jack’s shoulder, both of them peering into his office, seemingly more interested in the space than him. Hannibal recognized the lack of courtesy as much as he was grateful for the lack of attention. His scalpel was cold on the skin of his wrist. He smoothed down his suit jacket and though it wasn’t an inch out of place, he felt thoroughly ruffled.

He could still feel Will’s presence beyond his mind as if in his periphery. It reached out to him with a new, vulnerable kind of longing. He ached to let it pull him in completely.

There was only so long he could get away with keeping Jack and Alana in the hallway, and his own reluctance was no good excuse. They could not know what they had interrupted.

“Please, come in,” he said finally, stepping out of the doorway. “I imagine you have a good reason for such an unexpected visit. How can I help you?”

They both visibly deflated at the sight of his empty office.

“We’ve lost Will Graham,” Alana said, her comment light with humour to offset Jack’s increasingly serious rumination. He’d furrowed his eyebrows, circling in the office as if he could find sign of Will hiding behind a curtain, mud-splattered runners sticking out of the bottom.

Hannibal tilted his head. Where had Will gone to, and what provoked their two colleagues into searching for him here?

“And you’re doing the neighbourhood drive-by trying to spot his tail,” he filled in.

“You uncovered your eye,” Alana said, turning to face him directly and lowering her voice into something more personal. “How is it doing, Hannibal?”

“I’ve lost sight of a few things, it seems.”

Alana stared up at him in wonder, but Jack piped up before she could respond.

“He gave us reason to believe he would be here,” Jack said, continuing his stalk of the perimeter. He was decidedly suspicious, in that clipped, aggressive way Jack could be. Hannibal had always respected his manner as an FBI agent, but he did not want it in his office, especially not at a time like this. “Any idea where he might be?”

“I have not spoken to him since last night,” he said truthfully.

“He snuck out of a crime scene abruptly and without alerting anyone. He was rather ominous on the phone to Jack and he hasn’t been picking up since.” Alana explained. “I have to say,

I'm getting worried, considering his condition and all. He may still be debilitated this far into his treatment plan."

Jack turned on him. "'Ask Hannibal Lecter.' That's what he told me. Any idea why?"

Hannibal shook his head, relaxing his face into an approximation of surprise and worry. He side-stepped to his desk and tapped to bring his smartphone to life. He scanned quickly to confirm that there were no missed calls or messages, but then something drew his eyes amongst his email notifications from 15 minutes ago—

7:57pm:

SafeWise *Intruder alert*

Detected unauthorized entry — Backdoor

To disable alarm, please click here and verify your four-digit code: xxx.com/xxx or call (xxx)-xxx-xxxx

7:59pm:

SafeWise *alarm successfully disabled*

His scalp prickled with realization. He recalled the leg he had in his downstairs cooler, cut from the knee down and still unprepared and unmistakeable as the one missing from James Grey. If Will could disable his home security system, he could certainly find his way into the basement. Perhaps he was already there and calling for backup.

He let his scalpel inch down his wrist to the palm of his hand.

"It's my understanding that Will's been recovering well, but this is the sort of thing that can arise again without warning, isn't it?" Jack asked. "I'd like to get your opinion, Doctor, so we can make sure he doesn't hurt himself. Me and Doctor Bloom may have differing opinions on this, but it is *my* opinion that Will's been acting strange for a long while now and not informing us of everything he should be."

With the comforting touch of stainless steel in his fingertips, Hannibal appraised the positions of each of them in his office—weapons in reach, proximity to exits, speeds at which they could call for help. He felt confident that he could do what needed to be done. His affections were and always had been negligible to what he needed to do. In fact, it was love that made it all so significant. In the life that had mattered, he promised them their deaths. Their lives were owed to him, and always had been.

It was only time and fate that made now a convenient occasion.

Instead of responding, he slashed through the air with the scalpel. It was a delicate movement in reality, despite how erratic it must have come across as the blade severed Jack Crawford's artery in one exact motion.

Both Jack and Alana's reactions came with delay. Jack's hand clapped over his neck fruitlessly as blood spurted from his neck and he raised his eyes to Hannibal in confusion and betrayal. Across the room, Alana sputtered, taking a charging step forward and then an uncertain step right back.

"My apologies, I don't have time to explain as much as you would like," he said, wiping the scalpel on a handkerchief from his breast. "I assure you that in another life you would get the Chesapeake Ripper, Jack. Just not this one."

Jack grasped at the desk as he went down, but he collapsed empty handed, staring up at Hannibal as if the truth in front of him could still change.

He heard the clacking of Alana's footsteps behind him. She always was a runner.

Hannibal charged forward and caught the door handle before she could slam it closed behind her. He grabbed the back of her collar and yanked her into the room hard enough that she fell to the floor. He adjusted his grip on the scalpel.

"Now, now, Alana, not so hasty."

She pushed herself up, staring wide-eyed at him.

"Hannibal, hey, come back to me. Do you remember where you are right now? Hannibal, just focus on my voice, okay? Your name is *Hannibal Lecter.*"

Alana assumed he must be having a psychotic episode. It was more gracious than he deserved.

"Alana, my dear. In another life I would have given you a chance to look the other way. And you would have never taken it."

He descended upon her then. He did not know how much time he really had. It could be close to no time at all depending on what Will decided to do. He could not take his time, not when his escape needed to be so immediate. With a last solemn appraisal of her fearful gaze, he sliced the scalpel across her throat and her scream turned to a gurgling cough.

Nice and clean. He would not give them a second chance to get away.

He watched the life drain out of her as she scrambled at his arms. She alternated between pushing him away and clutching on. He wondered if she found comfort in him being there while she faded away. He wondered if her association of unwavering trust won out against her fear of seeing the truth of him. Her eyes screamed for help that he would not give, even as he stroked a tender hand down her cheek.

A loud *bang* rendered them both still, the way prey became when they were trying to go undetected. The acrid smell of gunpowder filled his nose, and with it…

He rolled off of Alana and pushed to his feet to face Will. He stood over Jack, who was still sputtering but hadn't entirely lost himself on the floor.

Hannibal pressed a hand to the back of his thigh where his blood ran hot. It felt as slick as his crotch was, still encased in his warm semen. His flesh burned, the heavy feeling of something lodged in his body that didn't belong there and was scorching everything in its surroundings.

"You never were the best shot," Hannibal said. "No, your bad shoulder didn't particularly allow for it. But you always shot more than once when you were trying to kill, didn't you?"

Will was pointing Jack's gun at him, but it shook and faltered as he tilted to look at Alana. As weak and voiceless as Jack and Alana were, their dying seemed to echo through the room. The smell of blood permeated every inch, splattered to each corner of the room.

Hannibal limped forward. Will turned his eyes and his gun back on him. Hannibal felt the familiar stab of panic. Not for his life—no, he was feeling rather invulnerable right now—but for the potential of loss.

"What did they do to you?" Will asked, looking between Jack and Alana's dying bodies. Still he did not understand the world he was not privy to.

"Would you believe me if I told you another world existed much like our own, in parallel but for what I have influenced? In that world you are there but changed, as are Jack and Alana. In it, I made a promise to them—just as I made a promise to you."

"What promise?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"For you? To do whatever it took. To be where you could always see."

Will dropped his arms so the gun dangled at his side. He shook his head in jerky motions. His mouth stretched momentarily into a strange grimace.

"You could be very sick right now. These are the words of a sick man—the *actions* of one. I know some of what it's like to be that sick, Hannibal."

"You are more perceptive than that. Will, tell me what you see."

Will's eyes darted around the room, wet and shining like glass. Silence surrounded them now. The twitching of muscles, the uncertainty of brain function or awareness. Certain death. Will hadn't even tried to save them.

"What I see… is a man who refuses to let me in, time and time again." He put his gun down on the desk. His hands were shaking.

"You did not see nothing," Hannibal said.

Will's eyebrows twitched together. "I… suspected something more below the surface. I could not ascertain exactly what it was, but…"

Hannibal *tsk*'d. "Now now, there's no reason to lie, is there?"

"I am not *lying*," Will insisted, taken aback.

“You hid things from me. You followed me. You must have known something of the nature of this.”

“I—” Will barked out a high-pitched laugh, then shook his head. “I did not follow you because I thought you were the *Ripper*. I followed you because…”

“Yes?” Hannibal prompted, confounded by where this conversation was going.

Will spread his arms and then let them fall with a slap against his body. “I followed you because I wanted to know if you were seeing someone *else*,” he sneered.

Hannibal watched him silently, mentally parsing through every moment that made him so paranoid the past months. The familiar car out of place on Bedelia’s street, Will’s reluctance to speak of his cases, the avoidance of any mention of Will’s darkness below the surface.

Will continued, speaking hastily with short, chipped words. “Something has been off this entire time, and at first I ascribed it to infidelity. Your distance, your avoidance, your refusal to fully commit… I thought if I could catch your disloyalty in the act, I’d have the strength to cut you off for good, because I couldn’t just walk away without knowing.”

Hannibal blinked. It felt so comparably normal to what he expected.

“There was Tobias, there was your… beautiful therapist. There was a whole life of this meticulously crafted image in the world to parse through. It was creeping into my hallucinations, into my slipping mind. And you know what the funny thing is? I wanted to be good enough for you, for that *image.* Hell, I stopped telling you so much about the cases so I wouldn’t be the guy obsessed with murder. I thought I had to protect *you* from *me.”*

Will laughed, a short, high-pitched outburst that made Hannibal flinch.

“Will….” He began.

“—But then there was the Ripper finding his way into my mind,” Will said before Hannibal could speak. “I was getting the two of you… confused. Seeking his love. Hunting you. It wasn’t until I saw the body today that it fully clicked. That the darkness I detected, this darkness that had adopted new depths in the past weeks, that felt so impossible, so otherworldly, could be truer than I knew. It is true, it’s all *you.*”

Hannibal repeated it in his mind. This might have all been avoided had he just waited longer to kill someone else. In any matter, Will had left the crime scene. He had come to Hannibal instead. He had not called the police, or else Hannibal imagined he would already be in handcuffs right now.

He approached him, careful not to startle, and cupped either side of Will’s face. Will leaned in to him and then promptly jerked back to look at him.

“I felt *something* here. Tell me I’m not crazy in that.”

Hannibal brushed his lips over his temple. His beautiful Will, feeling so much in every world. He had the potential for so much violence and love in equal parts. Hannibal felt vindicated to

be on the receiving end of his passion, even though he'd been too blind to see most of it.

"What you feel is true, just misplaced, and those suggestions of another world, they're more true than you could know," Hannibal said. "It does not mean the love was not real."

He regret that this felt like a goodbye. He wanted to hold on to all he felt. The innocence and ease of this relationship; the breadth of potential before him, but it would never sustain. He was not supposed to be here.

"What changed? You're…" Will trailed off, glancing to the side where Jack's body lay.

"I found clarity, you could say. It never is so simple."

The more he said it, the more it felt true, those whispers in his mind giving him direction and clarity like he'd never been awarded before. Hannibal pulled Will's face back to his with a finger under his chin.

The man in his mind would not share.

"I'm going to kill you now, dear," he whispered. This he would make count. Take his time. Consume all that he could, and hope the love absorbed into his bones and stayed there, settled in his marrow. It was how he had endured the loss of Mischa all those years ago.

His hand under Will's chin slipped to his throat even as a tear slipped down his own cheek.

He slipped his fingers over Will's carotid artery and applied pressure to cut off blood flow to his brain. Will hardly tensed in his grip. It felt more like a cradle than anything, one necessary to know he could take Will somewhere they could find privacy. He felt carefully over his pulse, holding him up even as Will slackened in his grip. He thought he wouldn't let Will die for a long time now, even as he began to consume him, bit by bit, allowing Will to share in his flesh—his otherworldly, powerful body, made of the identical cells of his twin. It would be his most cherished meal since his first, and his last cherished meal in this world.

A hit to his gut knocked the air out of him. It took a moment to register the screaming, sharp ache in his abdomen. He hadn't seen another weapon on Will, but when he looked down, the letter opener from his desk was sticking out of him.

He appraised it like it was just another part of Will, held loosely in his palm, and then Will jerked the knife forward, *deeper*.

Hannibal grunted and stumbled back, ripping himself off the blade. He almost collapsed on the spot. He could feel the warm blood rushing out of him, matching what streamed down the back of his leg. He'd let his guard down.

He tried to compartmentalize his pain; identify what Will had punctured. This didn't have to be the end.

The presence in his mind pushed back at him.

Hannibal snarled automatically and then a fist swung at his face. Will hit him hard enough to knock him on his back on the floor in the middle of their therapy chairs.

“I do see you now,” Will said, stalking after him. He dropped down on him with a hard knee against his ribs. Hannibal twisted away from the weight, but Will held him down. “You fucker, I was so ready to drop everything for you. Do—*anything* for you. Do you get that?”

Hannibal spit the blood pooling in his mouth to the side. His mind was buzzing louder and louder. He should fight back, he thought, get this under control while he still had the strength to do so.

Will grabbed him by his chin and held him still. He loomed over Hannibal, his nose only inches away and his eyes blazing.

“But you didn’t want me,” he spat. “You strung me along.”

I want you, Hannibal thought. *Like this.* Will was stunning in his rage, quivering like his mortal body could not hold all he felt. His motions were true and sure and deadly—Hannibal could feel death’s cloak falling over him even before the fatal blow could come, and then he knew: this was exactly why he was here, to fuel Will’s becoming and witness it in full. To learn every side of him and find certainty in this love. He adored them both and felt their echoing voices in their shared natures. Beyond this world, Will’s voice seemed to offer the wordless comfort he needed through the noise.

A slap landed heavy and hot and his cheek. “Don’t you dare go inside on me right now.”

His head spun and his injuries were undoubtedly begging for attention, but this love was all he could think of. It was glorious to find himself on the receiving end of such beauty.

He did not want to let Will go. He didn’t want it to be over. When he spoke, blood spluttered from his lips.

“I believe there is something that connects us in every world, Will Graham. I would always wish to find you all over again. Trust your instincts; that is all I’ve ever wanted for you.”

Will searched his face, his eyes alive like Hannibal had never seen them before. He’d never truly seen Will come into himself like this. He would worship him like this. He wanted to ask him to let him follow, to let this last a while longer. They could stretch it out, he’d decided. *Please,* he thought.

Will lifted the knife in the air and slammed the blade down into his chest.

Death

Holes littered his chest, rupturing his lungs and piercing the tough muscle of his heart. Every hit collapsed his chest cavity until he caved in entirely. He had the sense of brutality even as he went under, inside himself, taken in by a peace that he felt shouldn't really be there. He was gone and it was too late.

He was sitting up. Will sat across from him at the little table in his kitchen. He was dressed now with one palm curled around a glass of amber liquid. Next to it on the table was a generic pill bottle, label turned away from Hannibal. The top was off and it looked mostly full. Hannibal's eyes lingered on it for a moment longer before he tore his gaze back to Will.

The other man was startlingly calm. Hannibal couldn't shake the all-too-familiar heaviness in his gut. It felt as though he'd been betrayed again, and he didn't even know how this time.

"Will."

"I see you didn't take our interruption too well either," Will said, rotating the glass absentmindedly. "Rude, wasn't it?"

After all that had happened, here Will was, mocking him.

"I don't suppose you murdered anyone during our time apart as well?" He tried to keep his voice light and his expression neutral, but the sarcasm was biting on his tongue. He knew he was panicking below his veneer, shaking his rib cage that still ached from the aftereffects of the blows. He was glad he could feel something of it—he felt so far away from that world already.

He might have made the wrong decision, but he'd made this decision. He'd made this decision on his own, didn't he?

Will tilted his head back and forth, considering. "It is perhaps a question of… observation or participation."

Hannibal's head shot up at the familiar words.

"Ah, Bedelia's been doing talks. Full of bullshit, obviously, but I thought that part sounded like you…."

"*Will,"* he seethed. He was beginning to see the shape of Will's cruelty, how it had hidden itself below.

"You were surprisingly receptive to suggestion."

"It was you that convinced me I was in danger," Hannibal said. "That I wasn't supposed to be there."

“Was it?” Will asked, bringing the glass to his mouth. Rhetoric. Obnoxious.

“You took me home to rattle me, the opportunist that you are, and then you made love to me to ensure I was caught off guard. It isolated me. Made me feel like you were the only one I need.”

Will dug a single pill out of the pill bottle and plopped it in his mouth, chasing it with his whiskey.

“Don’t assume everything is so simple to have only one motivation behind it. You know me better than that.”

“Do I?” he frowned. He didn’t know how to process all he’d lost. “It seems we are still in a game of deception. I hardly know who you are outside of it.”

“Forgiveness is a knotty concept. It will either happen or it won’t. Going off our history, I’ll take my chances.”

Hannibal closed his eyes and tried to inhale a calming breath. As perfectly as he could recreate the relief of his metabolic processes in his imagination, he was all too aware that he was now trapped inside a dream. He had died.

Again.

In his memory, he could see the last flash of Will Graham slashing a blade down over his chest, his expression one of fiery determination as he directed every bit of his rage toward Hannibal and became someone else in the process. Changed. *Become.* And now alone.

“What you did was isolate your brother of another world,” he said.

Will snorted. “Brother.” He put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “He did nothing to deserve you as you are. *I* changed you. It was all wrong, couldn’t you see that? It never would have worked.”

“That wasn’t your choice to make.”

“What did you even expect?” Will asked. “That you’d hang around half in your mind with me and half in the real world with him until one or both of us died?”

Will sat back and plucked another pill from the bottle.

Hannibal finally gave in to his curiosity. “What are the pills, Will?”

Will rotated the bottle on the table so Hannibal could see the label. *VICODIN Qty: 30*

He rolled his right shoulder. “Got myself to a doctor after everything went down. You’d taken care of my surgery; they took care of my aches and pains. Then I found a new kind of medicine instead. Thought it was good to keep something like this on hand.”

Will washed back another pill. Hannibal knew the whiskey would only enhance the opioid's effects.

"Life is precious, Will. I cannot support this." So too could he not really stop it, not when he knew this was really happening in his real life, beyond the copy he saw in his mind. It hurt; Will's life was more precious than them all. Would he be gone from Hannibal for good, just after losing the other? Was this Will's ultimate payback for losing him first?

"It was a neighbour that took my dogs when I went after you. This widow on an overgrown acreage, husband gone from lung cancer. I could tell she missed the company. She'll take good care of them. Your money will too. I donated the rest of what I could get to—all that money and it's a real hassle to withdraw it, isn't it? Well, your lawyer can deal with it when he gets my will. It's set to send in the morning."

Hannibal squeezed his eyes shut, but it didn't blind him to the way his world was crumbling into pieces around him. When he opened them again, tears blurred his vision.

"This is the worst thing you could do to hurt me. You poison me if you continue like this. I will be untethered without you around."

"I need you to trust me instead."

"How can I possibly? After this?" Hannibal asked.

"You're dying. Don't get me wrong, you're long past any hope of recovery. Your cardiac muscle was punctured and your brain will be behind shortly as your blood ceases pumping. Time is only so stretched within your mind, and it cannot be stopped. When you leave here—and you will, very soon now—I need you to wish for me. Not another version or an ideal. Me exactly as I am now."

Hannibal watched, speechless, as Will picked up a small handful of pills and swallowed them back.

"And I will follow you," Will said on his breath out.

"It was never your wish," Hannibal muttered.

"I didn't say that, did I?" Will said. "Whatever it was, it's unknowable to us. All we know is it was something in us that made it happen."

"And if it doesn't work a second time?"

"Then neither of us will live without the other," Will said simply. Hannibal heard the almost childish amendment under his words. *If I can't have you, no one can.*

"It sounds as though you have very little to lose," Hannibal said, blinking his eyes at a rush of dizziness.

Will shrugged. He picked up the pill bottle, appraised it for a moment, and then tilted it back into his mouth, draining the last of the pills. Hannibal was starting to feel worse as if he was

the one stuffing his body with hydrocodone and paracetamol. The entire room withered around him, the way he'd felt his castle might.

"You don't get it. I already lost everything," Will said.

"I truly wasn't enough for you here. Or perhaps you just hated the aspect of sharing?"

"You wouldn't have been able to share, don't kid yourself."

He supposed it was true that he never would want to share Will, least of all with himself, the one person who he could never beat. It didn't ease the hurt. He could have lived a full life and then wished for him again after it all. An infinite number of lives, and Wills, all for him to covet. Taken away.

"You're dying, Hannibal. It's all going to go away now," he said.

"I don't want to lose you," Hannibal muttered. He blinked against the warping room before him, slipping away and obscuring Will's attentive and sad face.

"I know," Will said.

And everything went away.

Rebirth

In his dream, he was running through the halls of his first home, but he didn't know which way to go between winding corridors and unlit halls. An eternity may have passed and still there was no sign of what he was chasing or what chased him. Deep inside the gloom, he was only vaguely aware of his own delirium and the possibility that this was what was left for him.

When he stumbled upon the door to the exit at last, he lunged for the escape.

He jolted as he woke, sending his coffee cup crashing to the floor in front of Will's bed. The clatter was enough to echo through the house, but Will, bruised and bundled up in plaid and his dusty duvet, did not stir.

Hannibal lurched toward him. His newly injured and aching leg took him by surprise and sent him stumbling most of the way onto Will's bed. The burning sensation on his back was a constant, so inflamed that he could imagine a wildfire mapped between his shoulder blades.

He got his hands onto Will over the covers. Solid, real. Hannibal had learned the difference between his mind and what was an altogether if unlikely reality, and this was certain reality. His injuries and fatigue made there no question about it.

He deftly felt for Will's pulse and settled ever so slightly when he found it. Still, he did not wake. Will's eyes were still beneath his eyelids as if he did not see anything at all.

They were here again. Back before everything had gone wrong.

Hannibal crawled over him and settled on the other side of the bed with some effort.

He felt an exhaustion that went deeper than his less-than-pristine physical state, overwhelmed by all that had happened. He wished he could convince himself it had all been a dream. Did it harm him to endure these deaths and rebirths, down to his soul or whatever element of him moved through time and space? Would the lasting effects of his broken heart withstand the travel to this other world? Just how much more could he take?

Death had always been something of a comfort to him. The idea that life could end at any moment freed him from his anxieties. It would be a waste to not appreciate every bit of beauty and horror that came his way when it could all be gone in an instant. Strangely, the idea that death no longer stood in his way made life feel all the more fragile. There were far worse things to lose than his life.

Death itself could be an escape. A surrender. Retribution. Will himself had confirmed that.

Loss was much more terrifying. He'd lost Will already, and he didn't know how to reconcile that within himself. It seemed not unlikely that he might lose him again now.

He did not know who would wake up next to him. He did not know what memories, if any, he would retain in this world. He did not know if the man with Will's scarred face would wake at all anymore.

It was still the nighttime, lit only by the moon in the sky, but he could feel the morning pressing in on them all the same. They were running out of time and all he could do was wait.

His notebook was still in his jacket pocket. Earlier pages were scribbled with drafts of his equation alongside other references, but the last pages that he'd written in the final hours of the morning were blank and untouched. If it came to it, would he be able to recreate what he'd made that day in the throes of his panic when he was wishing for another chance? Could he get back to that past world somehow? Gain a third chance to do things right?

Despite the fantasy of it, he knew the truth now. He'd been indelibly changed. The past could not handle him as much as he could not handle the regression of starting over again. It was no true home for him.

While he laid waiting, he entered his memory palace. Around and around he went, whisking through timeless rooms built up with the overlap of their memories and associations. He skimmed the quiet land of Castle Lecter, exorcised by Will into a skeleton picked clean. There was no sign of Will to be found, but he hadn't expected there to be.

"Will," he whispered to the unresponsive body at his side. "I do. I forgive you."

The sun would rise shortly. He didn't know if he could carry Will any further and he could not bear to leave his side. Jack's gun would not be forgiving when he came by next nightfall.

Hannibal rested his head over Will's chest to hear his steady heartbeat and against all likelihood, fell asleep.

Will woke with a gasp that startled Hannibal off him. His hands flew up to his chest, then his throat, and Hannibal grabbed his wrist to halt his panicked movements. Will calmed down in increments, taking in their surroundings much like Hannibal had.

"Will. Do I have you?" Hannibal asked, searching his gaze urgently. Will's turned to him, panting desperately.

"You chose me," he breathed. "I really didn't know if you were going to choose me in the end there."

Hannibal could have crumpled right then and there with relief, reduced to a barely sentient slab of flesh and bone at Will's lap.

"What else could I have done?" he asked. It was more than simple familiarity looking at Will now. It was a recognition of all they'd been through together. It was him, the man he'd only been able to reach inside his mind for so long.

"I believe you could have done just about anything else," Will said.

"I could not have been certain that anything would work."

"I didn't know either. I took a gamble."

Hannibal glared, remembering. "You took a gamble on your own life."

"How many times have you taken a gamble on my life?" Will shot back. "It worked, Hannibal."

Hannibal opened his mouth to reply that it was in the worst way and suicide was the enemy, but Will pressed his lips to Hannibal's before he could. He wrapped his hands around the back of Hannibal's neck and pulled him in. It was a hard and directionless kiss, more a smush of their faces as Will pulled in air through his nose and reached for a tighter grip around Hannibal's shoulders. Every thought apart from their reunion dissipated from his mind as he aligned their bodies and basked in their true closeness after what felt like an eternity. It was different. It was always going to be different—*right*—with him.

Will kissed him like a starving man, hardly even moving his lips against him. Hannibal could relate to the feeling that he could never be truly fulfilled.

Will pulled back with a pop. "Fuck. We need to get out of here."

He nodded in assent, as much as he already mourned the loss of leaving Will's bed. He sat up and was instantly reminded of his aching body. Will's movements were similarly stiff and punctuated by a wince as he pushed himself up.

"Jeez, I need a fucking drink," Will said.

"Will…."

"Look, I know how you feel. I'll work on it. You… you can hold me to it. Later. First, let's just get out of here alive."

Will grabbed a bag and rapidly filled it with the most obligatory of items—underclothes, items for cleaning and bandaging, water bottles, some non-perishables he had at the bottom of his pantry, and his gun. Hannibal wondered if Will would kill Jack himself if it came to it.

They at least had the hindsight—foresight?—to know they had until the evening before Jack arrived, but it would be preferable to get some distance between them before various border security were alerted of Hannibal's presence.

He stepped out onto the porch and lifted his hand to shield his eyes from the sun. It took a minute to catch sight of Chiyoh, and he suspected he only did because she made herself seen for him. When their eyes met, he nodded his head once in respect. He could feel himself smiling with his eyes and she returned it with a curious kind of tilt of her head. Her guard was no longer necessary.

They would take her stolen car and she could take Will's vehicle until she found a better option. He had no doubt that she could take care of herself.

Hannibal took his place in the driver's seat while Will threw his bag in the back and climbed into the passenger's seat. As he pulled out of Will's long driveway, Will passed him some over-the-counter painkillers. He accepted it and leaned a bit forward so the burn on his back wasn't pressed against the car seat. They would need to stop at a safe location for some items to treat it.

When he got on the highway, he realized he didn't know where he was going.

"Just how much did you look into the properties I left for you?" Hannibal asked.

"About as little as I could get away with. I told Sawyer I was hands-off, but some of it was unavoidable."

"Did you develop any preferences in your time?" Hannibal asked.

Will looked over at him. His expression was difficult to read.

He tried again. "Where would you like us to go, Will?"

"Not Florence," he answered quickly.

"Not Florence," Hannibal agreed, suddenly imbued with the memories of *this* world. It had felt so far away for a time; inconsequential with his new fate. It felt very much of consequence now that he was back here, burning with the scars of its visit.

Months apart, shacked up with Bedelia and tracking those who were tracking him. It felt like a dream or another lifetime.

It was.

Will dropped his head into his hands. He pressed his fingers into the skin around his eyes.

"Will?" Hannibal prompted, but stopped there. He could hear the *"Are you all right?"* in his own tone, but what a silly question that was to ask someone like Will Graham.

"I might have spent months wanting you back, but it doesn't mean I know what to do with you now that you're here," Will said.

He stopped rubbing up and down his face and collapsed sideways into the car door. His under-eye bags were drawn down with bruises nearly black, but Hannibal suspected the

puffiness was all his own weariness. Will's hand kept flexing on his knee; perhaps it was a drink he ached for in his hand.

Hannibal wondered what it had been like for Will to die. Had it taken all those hours that his body here had refused to wake? Did he panic midway through or remember something he'd forgotten? Had he attempted to get the poison out of him a second too late? Had he called Molly or wished he still had his dogs around to hold tight? Did he wonder if it was worth it to give up what he already had?

A life, finally free from Hannibal.

For a moment there, he might have been able to get lost in the dream of starting a life with Will at last. It had been a distant dream for as long as he could remember, but it never quite felt plausible even at the cusp of their promises. Tragedy had a way of alerting its entrance, an inevitability at the corner of your vision like a haunt.

He tightened his hands around the steering wheel. Will had killed him, and even if it was his comparably naive doppelgänger used by proxy, Hannibal had no uncertainty about whose hands were really red.

Will had taken so much more than his life. He'd left his mirrored brother abandoned in an unreachable world with a million unanswered questions, immediately following Hannibal's admittedly rash disposal of Jack and Alana, his questionable but otherwise solid support system. How must Will have felt when the adrenaline of a deserved kill dissipated and left him alone in a pool of blood?

Killing could be a lonely sport. Hannibal knew that well.

For a while, he'd held the bliss of keeping both sides of Will. Now one had been torn away from him and he was left with the cruel monster who had done it.

He jerked the steering wheel to the side and the car skidded across the shoulder of the road until he caught the dirt turnout between fields. Will jolted upright and fumbled for the handle above the door as the car bounced along dips in the road created by much heavier vehicles. He stopped abruptly a few meters down the work road and ripped his way out of his seatbelt and the car. He needed air. He needed something.

"Hannibal!" Will called after him between the click of his own seatbelt and door.

Hannibal stole away to the space in front of the car, seeking the oxygen that had left him. A psychological response certainly. Traumatized individuals could be particularly susceptible to the kind of irrational paranoia that often made their nightmares come true in effect. His control could so easily slip away if he didn't get a hold of it.

Will grabbed his arm and Hannibal spun on him, getting his hands around his throat before he could think about it. Will was not the kind of man who would give a predator his space. He had a shocking lack of self-preservation, this man.

He throttled Will every step of the way backward until he pushed him down onto the hood of the car. Will yanked at his wrists, but he maintained his grip, choking Will into the hard metal. He imagined his eyes losing all their light like he'd tried to do in his past world.

Will kicked out aimlessly until one knee rammed into his groin. Hannibal faltered and Will pushed him back with enough strength to knock him to the ground.

Will wheezed and then hacked out a cough, holding himself up on his knees. Hannibal folded up on the ground, battling a sudden nausea from the hit.

"It's always back to violence with you, isn't it? That's all you *know*," Will croaked, lifting a hand to rub at his reddening neck. "This is what I have to look forward to now that you can touch me for real?"

"And what would you suggest instead?" Hannibal asked, raising his voice to be heard over the sound of traffic. A dozen cars drove by, but none stopped to watch their tussle.

Will shook his head and settled back on the hood of the car. "I don't fucking know."

"Are we unsustainable, Will? Tell me, has this always been an inevitability for you?"

Will only shrugged his shoulders and squinted past the morning light through the field. Hannibal pushed himself to stand with some effort.

"I don't know what you want from me," Hannibal said, breathing heavily. "And I'm not certain you know either."

"You got me there," Will drawled.

"Then what will it be? We go on until one of us destroys the other, is that it?"

"All I know," Will said, hardening his expression. "Is I needed you back. I didn't do well without you, and you didn't do well without me, so can we get back in this car and go somewhere together? I couldn't care less where it is. It's looking like my necessities in life have simplified significantly."

Hannibal observed him for another moment but could not deny the simple truth of it: they could not live without each other. Forgiveness could be finicky, but love was a constant. If destruction was the natural outcome of their bond, then he could not refuse it. So long as Will was honest in choosing Hannibal's presence from here on out.

He had the sense that they were both walking into a purgatory of their own making.

"Let's." He walked toward the driver's side door but Will put out a hand to his chest to stop him.

"I will drive after that stunt you pulled. Fuck. Get in," he said.

Hannibal relented.

Off the I-95 in southern Georgia, after a quiet drive with only a single obligatory stop for supplies, they stopped at a motel rundown and isolated enough to be a safe haven for the night. They were only part of the way to his lawyer, who would supply them with the right papers and the necessary discretion for enough money.

Where they would go from there seemed of little matter.

As the least recognizable of the two, Will paid for their room. He pulled a ball cap down over the bandage of his forehead, secured the collar of his flannel around his throat, and strode into the main office. From outside, Hannibal could hear the clipped timber of his words as he quickly took on the affectation of someone rural enough to belong as far south as here.

Inside the motel room, Will stripped down to his white undershirt. His throat had darkened into long purple lines where Hannibal's hands had been. There was hardly any visible part of him that wasn't blotched with discolouration. The way he stiffly lowered himself onto the bed sheets revealed his discomfort.

Things had been almost entirely silent since their morning outburst, everything unsaid hanging in the air.

Hannibal surpassed the bed on the other side of the room and laid down next to him, not quite touching. He craved the escape of his mind and nearly sank into it instinctively before he stopped himself. He looked to the side and took note of how Will seemed to have gone inside of himself too. Of course.

He sat back and opened his mind's eye. He followed the presence to where he knew he would find it.

Will was giving his attention to his dogs when he arrived. Hannibal hadn't seen him smile for a while, but he was smiling now as he rubbed their ears. Hannibal watched him without intruding as he took his place in his armchair.

"Is it easier to live in your mind now?" he asked Will.

"Isn't it for you?" Will asked, standing up again.

"Is this where we will be able to talk about what we need to discuss?"

"Now I wouldn't go that far," Will said dryly. "How long have we relied on a healthy level of avoidance?"

"Healthy is debatable. Do you continue to resent me?"

"Somehow… more now that you're back. Our degree of separation is gone. Your presence is stifling again—it seems there's no middle ground when it comes to you."

“I don’t tend to opt for partial measures,” Hannibal said. “With the dissipation of our distance, we have the chance to hurt each other again. Our safe bounds are no more.”

“You demonstrated that well on our way over here. We hardly made it fifteen minutes out.”

Hannibal found he didn’t have anything to respond. He felt ashamed, but so too did he feel justified in his feelings. He had been betrayed, and it was a cut toward an increasingly tender spot around his chest. Even now, he did not know where to put the hurt.

Will took his spot in the other armchair and set his gaze on Hannibal with a determined look, his head lowered nearly to his chin.

“And what about your newfound resentment toward me?” Will asked.

“It burns,” he replied.

“Yes. Doesn’t it.”

“Does it ever stop?”

“With time? Perhaps. But I never forget completely.”

Perhaps it was right that they shared in this burden. The best retribution rarely offered either party peace.

He wanted a way to reciprocate all that Will had taken away from him, to make him understand, but there was no one comparable that he could take away from Will other than himself. Will had already endured that loss. He’d endured the other losses that Hannibal had wrought upon him, as much as they could not compare. It seemed that perhaps they were even and it was only inevitable that they both live with the sort of grief and resentment he had now.

Will sighed and when Hannibal looked at him again, he said, “Open your eyes.”

Hannibal was once again met with the ugly motel room at dusk. The bed shifted and Will crawled over him, settling with his knees on either side of his hips. He ran his hands just above Hannibal’s waistband where his shirt was tucked in. The sight and the feeling of him left Hannibal momentarily transfixed.

“I do wonder if you merely wish to stake your claim,” Hannibal said. His body was quickly betraying him with every physiological sign of arousal and he knew soon it would be difficult to deny the simple physical pleasures of the man before him, regardless of his mental anguish.

“Can’t it be both?” Will asked. “I didn’t risk everything to get you back for nothing.”

He spread his hands across Hannibal’s hips and then leaned down until their faces were inches away. Hannibal recognized his mocking cruelty.

“I chose you,” Will said, echoing a past memory. “Do you know what that means?”

Yes, he did choose Hannibal, didn't he? It was all that Hannibal had wanted for a long while, perhaps even longer than he'd been able to recognize it in himself.

"I reckon it means you will never let me go again," he said.

Will smirked. "And you wouldn't even think of leaving, would you?"

"I don't believe I could handle it," he admitted.

"How inconvenient for you," Will whispered. He settled himself down even further until their chests were brushing and their noses slotted next to each other. They were breathing in each other's air.

Hannibal put his hands on Will's biceps at either side of his head where he held himself up—weight tilted to his good side. Hannibal rubbed his skin soothingly, feeling Will's muscles twitch when he touched the sensitive skin of his inner arm. He was close enough that Hannibal couldn't quite focus his eyes, fluttering his lashes and catching shifting blotches of burst blood vessels and scabs so fresh they could be wet.

When the pressure between their lips deepened into a real kiss, Will was gentle, exploratory, signalling the way he was going to take his time. Hannibal willed himself to stay still and soft, but underneath was a pressing urge to funnel all his internal violence and desires into one and enact it toward Will.

Will was pulling up his shirt to expose the jut of his stomach and following the exposed trail with his hands. He was undressing Hannibal in increments, as though he could only lavish his attention part by part. Hannibal wasn't certain that it was sentimental. Will was assessing him like a curious academic.

Will shimmied downward and kissed the skin of his abdomen. He opened Hannibal's shirt completely and continued to admire him with his eyes and mouth while Hannibal watched him.

"You forget I've never had you. Not really," Will said, meeting his gaze while his lips grazed the thin hair down the centre of his stomach.

"In some ways I have never had you either. Not really."

"But in more ways than I have nonetheless."

"I tried to come to you in your mind just how I am. Authenticity is more important to me than fantasy is. However, I believe it was you who allowed things to spiral past natural laws for the sake of pleasure." He considered the ways they'd fit together so easily in their mind palace without the usual barriers of friction and body parts.

"You mean to tell me you didn't try to enhance anything thinking I'd never find out?" He sat up and tugged on Hannibal's fly, teasing.

"You insult me," Hannibal said, but a small smile spread across his face.

Will opened his fly completely and spread it to reveal a triangle of his thin underclothes, straining with his trapped cock. He tilted his head as he considered Hannibal, his eyes dragging slowly up his torso and making him feel thoroughly exposed despite being mostly covered

Will looked hungry nonetheless.

“When did you first realize?” Hannibal asked.

Will looked momentarily annoyed by the question. Clearly he understood what Hannibal was asking.

“When did you?” he shot back.

“I would have admitted your attractiveness from the very start. The attraction I feel now, however, developed gradually. I hardly expected it to feel so pressing.”

“I may have mistaken my feelings for other things for a while,” Will responded quickly. “But when I began associating you with my desires, it was difficult to avoid.”

“And when did your association change?” Hannibal asked, but he had a good idea.

“After I’d learned you fucked me there, obviously,” he confirmed, a little bitterly. “There are some associations that once they make their existences known, there’s no coming back from it anymore. This was one of those times.”

He pulled down Hannibal’s pants roughly. The action jostled him over the bed and he winced at the friction over his burn. Will pulled his pants and underwear off the rest of the way but then crawled back up and asked, “What is it?”

He helped Hannibal to sit up and drop his shirt off his shoulders with minimum movement. He peeled back the bandage to peek inside and sucked in air through his teeth in sympathy.

Will sat down in his lap. “Well, we’ll have to be careful won’t we?”

He had little hope of that regardless of Will’s sarcasm, but he didn’t really want his gentleness. He hoped that Will loved him so hard that the burnt, necrotic skin sloughed off into something smooth and made of his touch.

Taking advantage of their new position, he yanked off Will’s shirt and wrapped his arms around him to pull them skin to skin. Will was hot to the touch despite the cool motel room, and Hannibal suddenly felt freezing in comparison. His teeth found their way to his shoulder and he bit just enough to feel the resistance of his collarbone as he let his hands wander—holding back, still holding onto whatever control he had. He found the dip on Will’s back where the cigarette burn was and then brought his hands to his hips until he could place his thumbs on either edge of the scar on his abdomen. The skin there was tight and when he pressed down, Will twitched at the touch and pushed him back on the bed.

“I bought supplies when we stopped,” Will said. He snatched up the shopping bag and tore the seal on the small bottle of lubricant with his teeth.

“How do you see this happening, Will?” he asked. He wondered about the limitations of their injuries, but he took another look at Will’s expression and he knew nothing could stop them now.

“You’re going to do it to me,” he said simply. Too quietly, perhaps.

“The way I first showed you and denied you,” he filled in.

Will smiled sadly. “Don’t complicate this more than it needs to be, Hannibal.”

He dropped the bottle into Hannibal’s hands and crawled off of him and the bed. He closed himself into the washroom and left Hannibal to wait.

He felt more than before that Will was staking his claim, taking what he felt should have been his to begin with. A fruitless do-over, as if he could erase what had happened and start over. A replacement. What happened in that world would never leave Hannibal, that he was certain.

When Will emerged, he was completely nude, his cock mostly soft and gently swaying with each step. He paused for a moment by the bed. Hannibal felt something break down inside of him and he reached out a hand, asking. Needing.

Will came to him easily, drawing right back onto his lap with immediacy. Hannibal kissed the skin he could reach next to the bandage on his shoulder and up toward the lacerations and contusions littering his face. Will bowed down slightly to accept his affection and brought their hips together with a rolling pressure.

Hannibal wasn’t in the business of denying himself things. He wouldn’t do it to himself now, even out of resentment.

They moved together easily. It was like their minds had connected right down to each nerve impulse. He considered their bond as something parasitic but had to admit that their roles were too blurry to define. Some form of mutualism perhaps, but the harm they wrought to each other went against all the relationships Hannibal had known that spawned in the nature of self-preservation.

Will licked inside his mouth and Hannibal cradled his face as close as he could. They reminded him of leeches feeding on each other in a mutated imitation of an ouroboros, searching for nutrients among each other’s cells. They were hard and rocking against each other, but he was too consumed to even think about properly getting each other off, even with the way he ached. They were simply moving bodies caught up in each other.

“C’mon,” Will growled against his lips, thrusting more insistently to show that his patience wasn’t quite the same as Hannibal’s, or perhaps he simply wanted them connected in more ways than this. Hannibal could understand that urge deeply.

He slicked up his hand behind Will’s back while still holding onto him and then tossed the lube to the side. He reached behind him, catching his fingers against his rim as he slicked him

up everywhere just to feel this vulnerable spot where his skin was so warm and bordered by downy hair.

Will chased his fingers with his body until Hannibal sunk inside him, breaching the tight canal with one then two fingers quickly after.

He twisted his hand, finding the right angle to pleasure him while Will began to grind with new direction. He certainly felt closer to him like this. He only wanted to be closer.

Despite the familiar anatomy of his body, he was so different in movement from the man he touched in his last world. Will retained his instinctive fluidity, but he opened himself up for Hannibal so wholly here. There were no reservations in how he fucked himself down onto Hannibal's fingers and fell into sync with him like it was only natural. Hannibal may never have learned this had things not turned out how they did.

At least he knew exactly how to fuck him how he liked.

Will pulled away and Hannibal prepared himself as Will lined himself up. Hannibal supported him with his hands on his hip. He did not want to let go of any physical tether between them. He wanted to clutch Will against him until he was stuck.

Will sunk down onto him slowly, sucking in air through his teeth and wincing. He had not entirely bottomed out when he stopped to breathe.

Hannibal rubbed his hands up and down his hips. "You have never done this before."

"When would I have done this?" Will asked, sounding a bit defensive.

"At any point, to yourself."

"No," he gasped. "Not then. Not with you stuck in my mind."

With a heavy breath out, he sunk down completely and bowed forward to lay on top of Hannibal. It was Hannibal's turn to gasp at the tight envelopment of his cock. Will squirmed above him, only adding to the torture of being so deep inside him without fucking in earnest. He ground back and forth with his face pressed against Will's collar, but Will was weighing him down too much to move.

When Will started to move, everything seemed to slot into place. Slick and tight, Will rode him like he'd been waiting to do it all his life.

He no longer had to hold himself back from getting lost in his mind, he realized. He found Will there easily, still fucking onto him like something not of this world. Their surroundings changed from the unsightly motel to a glittering white world that seemed to glow outward from Will himself. Their physical coupling still felt real and visceral, but the images in their minds took on the dreamlike quality of a merging not possible in nature.

Will started panting, awkwardly favouring one side, so Hannibal gently rolled them over. He found a position on his knees that did not send pain up and down his body and fucked into

him languidly. Now it really was like the other time with his twin, only Will's face was a canvas for a new kind of art, marked by all they'd been together.

None of Hannibal's pain mattered anymore, sinking to the back of his mind as a dull thrum. It was only Will and the way he stared rapturously, desperately up at him.

Hannibal began to speed up and Will winced just once as he adjusted one leg further up on his back to spread his hips wider. He did, he realized, want to hurt Will. He wanted to mark every part of him in the most brutal way he could, even mutilate him if it meant making him his own. Perhaps if he had gotten the chance to kill Will in one world then some of his hunger would be sated. How beautifully he could craft Will's flesh and bone like clay and savour the resulting taste.

However, some things were too precious and too irreversible.

He felt himself getting closer at the thought and reached down to touch Will. It was difficult to balance with his injured leg smarting.

"Get on top of me," Hannibal whispered.

They rolled over again, this time with Will propped up with his elbows on either side of his head as they rocked together. He moved faster now with clear purpose. Hannibal reached down to get his palm around the head of Will's cock and felt him leaking over his knuckles. It was difficult to move with so little space between them as Will bent lower and lower until his head slotted between Hannibal's neck and shoulder.

Hannibal only just comprehended the wet ring of his mouth before Will was biting down and latching onto his muscle. Hannibal tensed instinctively, his mouth falling open in surprise as he felt his orgasm roll through him without warning at the first flash of pain. Will's teeth punctured his epidermis and met flesh, spouting blood around his mouth as they rode through the peak of their coupling.

"Will. *Will."*

Will was spilling over his hand and onto his stomach while he clenched his teeth dangerously tight around him. Only when his cock stopped twitching did his jaw unclench bit by bit as the pleasure became only a tingling aftereffect.

Will collapsed down, slipping off of him. His breathing was vocal with his exertion, and perhaps with pain as well. He settled with his cheek on Hannibal's chest and stayed there.

The room grew silent with the certainty of night. The only light was the yellow-dim of the fluorescent establishment signs outside. It would take only a modicum of concentration to be

where Will was undoubtedly lost in the comforts of his mind, but Hannibal stayed in the quiet of the real world.

A fifth of Jack bought without Hannibal's knowledge and procured from the shopping bag shortly after they made love sat three-quarters full on the side table. They were sticky against each other and goose-pimpled where the air conditioning reached their bare skin. Will could have been asleep, but when the fan turned off for periods of time, Hannibal swore he could still hear the gentle click of his eyelids, flitting in restlessness that didn't translate to his limbs. He did not move away from Hannibal.

Hannibal did not dare disturb their peace, even though their injuries felt increasingly pressing. They should have cleaned their wounds at the cusp of this new setting, ripe with unknown bacteria, but neither of them brought any attention to their ailments, not even his new bite mark that dripped like red molasses onto the sheets below.

They were caught in the anticipation and dread of a transitional period and Hannibal knew there was a greater test ahead of them, far more complicated than the simple promise to live together. It was a precarious thing and he intended to savour what they had for the time being.

When he considered where they would go from here, he saw a formless place built around them. There was a home much more familiar in their minds than any new place could ever be now, where they could still find the comforts of a past life. For Hannibal, that past life would forever be connected to a man who blossomed differently than the man next to him, who tried to give his entire self to Hannibal, and who he'd left behind.

In their future, he saw the blood and hate of continued resentment, just as he saw the joining of their minds in a symbiotic tenderness. He felt hope, and so often he knew hope could sustain far past the bitterness of a failing endeavour.

He hoped, and he hoped, and he held onto the certainty that beyond this brief life they would at least still seek each other out, and choose each other when it came to it.

For as long as they could still stand it.

End Notes

the end at last! i really appreciate everyone who's followed along with this story, especially those of you who left such lovely comments. i'm so glad to finally have this out in the world ❤️ you can find me on tumblr @will-gayham

i admit i do have a short story about (original) Will's perspective during certain times in the works, so it might not be entirely over...

❤️❤️❤️

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